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Regis Philbin waves goodbye during his final show on ABC's "Live With Regis and Kelly" in New York, Nov. 18, 2011. The popular TV host died July 24, 2020. He was 88. (CNS/Reuters/Brendan McDermid)



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Regis Philbin, the Catholic talk- and game-show host whose career in television spanned six decades, died July 24 at age 88 of cardiovascular disease at a hospital in Greenwich, Connecticut, where he lived.

Philbin is credited by Guinness World Records as having been on air more than anyone else on TV, putting the figure at more than 17,000 hours.

Philbin was a 1953 graduate of the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, and an avid supporter of his alma mater. He also graduated from Cardinal Hayes High School in New York, and was a generous benefactor there as well.

"Regis regaled millions on air through the years, oftentimes sharing a passionate love for his alma mater with viewers," said Holy Cross Fr. John Jenkins, Notre Dame's president, in a July 25 statement.

"He will be remembered at Notre Dame for his unfailing support for the university and its mission, including the Philbin Studio Theater in our performing arts center. He likewise was generous with his time and talent in support of South Bend's Center for the Homeless and other worthy causes. Our prayers are with his wife, Joy, and their daughters and Notre Dame alumnae Joanna and J.J."

In 2002, Philbin had given \$2.75 million for the construction of the Regis Philbin Studio Theater on the campus. It is home for lab and performance art productions in Notre Dame's department of film, television and theater. The 100-seat facility was designed for maximum technical and seating flexibility.

Philbin first came to national attention as the announcer and sidekick to Joey Bishop on Bishop's mid-1960s late-night talk show on ABC, which was seeking to siphon viewers from Johnny Carson and "The Tonight Show." It didn't work.

Undaunted, Philbin carved out a career, making a niche for himself in morning TV. From 1975 to 1981, he co-hosted "A.M. Los Angeles," first with Sarah Purcell and then with Cyndy Garvey, then-wife of Los Angeles Dodgers first baseman Steve Garvey.

In 1983, Philbin and Garvey reunited in New York on "The Morning Show," replicating their successful formula in the Big Apple. In 1985, Garvey was replaced by Kathie Lee Gifford, wife of New York Giants football star and "Monday Night Football" broadcaster Frank Gifford.

In 1988, what was "The Morning Show" went into syndication as "Live! With Regis and Kathie Lee." The show became an instant success.

Philbin and Gifford teamed up for a dozen years, until 2000. After Gifford left, Philbin took over the reins with a rotating cast of would-be co-hosts auditioning to be her successor. In 2001, Kelly Ripa was chosen, and she and Philbin continued dominating the ratings for a decade until Philbin stepped down from his co-hosting duties in 2011.

But Philbin's greatest success may have been hosting the U.S. version of "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" for ABC for three years. Upon its debut, it became a phenomenon, lifting ABC to first place in the ratings race -- and the Walt Disney Co.'s stock price in the process. "Millionaire," while a game show, also is credited with spawning the "reality TV" genre that continues on network TV.

Philbin co-wrote two books with Gifford during their time together on "Live!" and later penned three memoirs: "I'm Only One Man!" (1995), "Who Wants to Be Me?" (2000), and "How I Got This Way" (2011).

To help St. Mark Parish in Richmond, Kentucky, pare down a million-dollar debt, he came to the parish in 2005 to be the first special guest of the parish's "An Evening Among Friends" fundraiser.

In 2007, Philbin won \$175,000 on the Fox's "Are You Smarter Than a Fifth Grader?" and announced on the air that he would donate his winnings to Cardinal Hayes High

School. The year before, he gave the school his \$50,000 prize from winning "Celebrity Jeopardy" on another special episode for celebrities to win cash for their favorite charities.

Philbin also led capital campaigns for Cardinal Hayes in 1995 and '99 that raised \$7 million for the school, then donated \$500,000 in 2000 to renovate the school's auditorium.

"I think everything I am is the result of 16 years of Catholic education," Philbin said in a 1996 interview. "The values that you learn as a kid stay with you the rest of your life. Certainly, those nuns and brothers and priests drummed enough of those values into us that it helped us tremendously."

Funeral plans were not announced, but in the same interview, Philbin addressed rumors that he wanted his ashes to be scattered over the Notre Dame campus when he dies. "That's right," he said. "I want to be there forever."

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