Blog



Barron Hilton is pictured in a recent undated photo (Courtesy of the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation)



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Barron Hilton spent much of his life building the hotel company his father started into a powerhouse brand respected around the world.

Now his death on Sept. 19 at the age of 91 — like the death of his father Conrad at the same age in 1979 — means many non-government organizations and others, including women religious, will be further empowered to fight poverty, illiteracy and disease around the world.

This is because each man willed that 97% of their assets at the time of their deaths be channeled into the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation. Steven Hilton, chairperson of the Hilton Foundation board and Barron's son, announced shortly after his father's death the foundation's assets are now doubling to $6.3 billion.

In his last will and testament, Conrad wrote the following:

> Be ever watchful for the opportunity to shelter little children with the umbrella of your charity; be generous to their schools, their hospitals and their places of worship. Give aid to their protectors and defenders, the Sisters, who devote their love and life's work for the good of mankind, for they appeal especially to me of being deserving of help from the Foundation.

These words have guided the Hilton Foundation for more than 30 years in assisting women religious in their ministries around the world. I know this personally, as I have been associated with the Hilton Foundation since 1999 and a member of the Foundation board since 2009.

By coincidence, perhaps providence, I was attending Hilton Foundation convening of women religious grantees at the Hilton Foundation headquarters in Westlake Village, California, when I received the call that Barron had died. I am writing these reflections today because of Hilton grants that have supported Global Sisters Report for these past five years.

I first joined the Hilton family's philanthropic endeavors in 1999 when hired as the executive director of Conrad N. Hilton Fund for Sisters until I stepped down at the end of 2011, one of the most exciting periods of my life. This position took me on journeys to many parts of the world, seeking out sisters who were spending their

lives to improve the lives of children, youth and families in some of the most remote regions of the globe.

At that time, because the Fund for Sisters received annual grants from the foundation, I presented annual reports to the foundation board about our Fund for Sisters work. Barron was enthusiastic about the reports in which he could hear the stories and see photos showing the impact that the foundation money was having in some of the most deprived areas of the world. His face would light up in amazement at some of my adventures. His legacy of love for sisters will live on in perpetuity.

When I joined the foundation board in 2009, Barron, as board chair, invited me to his office as part of my orientation. As we sat and chatted, he looked seriously at me expressing concern about the reports that numbers of sisters in the U.S. was declining: "Sister, what will the world do without sisters?" I assured him that there are still many sisters worldwide and that God would provide. Just the previous year, the foundation board, at its retreat, reaffirmed its commitment to sisters and established a sisters' initiative at the foundation level. That initiative is in its second five-year strategic plan.

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Besides his creativity and brilliance, although a quiet, disciplined personality, he also had a fun side. He loved hunting, which I learned about at that meeting in his office. Discovering that I am from South Dakota, he told me about pheasant hunting escapades with his long-time friend Joe Foss, the two-term governor of South Dakota. They shared a passion for hunting, as well as aviation and football. One time at a board retreat at his ranch outside of Reno, Nevada, he invited the sisters present to enjoy his shooting range. I am from a hunting family, but had never held a gun before. To my surprise, I hit a bullseye. I learned something from my successful hand at shooting. It takes focus and steadiness to hit a bullseye, both qualities I admired in Barron.



Barron Hilton is pictured in an undated photo with his Beechcraft Staggerwing. In the U.S. Navy and later at the University of Southern California, he trained as a pilot. (Courtesy of the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation)

The staff at the Hilton Foundation has grown exponentially since 1999 as funds became available from the sale of the Hilton Hotel Corporation in 2007 and the philanthropic work of the foundation expanded. It is a great privilege to be on a board of Hilton family members and others who are so engaged and committed to the vision and values of Barron and his father. Their stories are inspiring and fun to read: *Be My Guest* and *The Hilton Legacy: Serving Humanity Worldwide*. Their philanthropic spirit and commitment to sisters is alive in the family members on the board: Steven Hilton, Hawley Hilton McAuliffe, Conrad Hilton III, Linda Hilton, Michael O. Hilton and Justin McAuliffe.

Sisters worldwide who benefitted from Barron's generosity will be praying for him and his family as they grieve his passing. Those prayers began the morning after the sisters at the convening heard he had died. In the evening, we celebrated his life with a memorial thanksgiving Mass, no doubt the first of many.

While his legacy in building the company is legendary, it's his philanthropy that will pay true dividends for millions of others for generations.

[Joyce Meyer is a member of the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary and is GSR's liaison to women religious outside of the United States.]