

Howard County

# Edward L. Cochran Jr., civil rights champion and Howard's second county executive, dies at 96



Jess Nocera

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When Edward L. Cochran Jr. joined the Howard County Board of Education in 1964, he immediately called for the rapid desegregation of public schools, which the district still was resisting a decade after the Supreme Court's landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling. Within a year, thanks to support from local churches and the community, Cochran persuaded his fellow board members to fully integrate the schools.

The assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963 spurred Cochran and his wife, Joan, to become heavily involved in local causes and organizations. They became active at their children's school PTAs, attended school board meetings and formed the School Board Nominating Federation with other residents. The federation advised the governor on appointments.

"He really believed in the public school system," said Del. Courtney Watson, Cochran's daughter. "He knew it had the power to change lives."

In the winter 1967 edition of *Columbia Today*, Cochran said he had six good reasons for his interest in the school system: "I have six children," said Cochran, then the school board's vice president. Cochran would go on to serve on the County Council and become Howard County's second county executive. Cochran died in his sleep on Sunday, Nov. 16. He was 96.

## **Grew up fast**

Born in Jarrettsville on the cusp of the Great Depression, Cochran was the firstborn son of Edward L. Cochran Sr. and Mary Elizabeth Roach.

Cochran tried to play high school baseball, but his playing days were cut short to tend the family dairy farm during World War II.

“He grew up fast because of the Depression and the early years of the war,” said his son, Chris Cochran.

Still, the elder Cochran became a lifelong Orioles fan. He graduated from Bel Air High School early and attended Loyola College, graduating in 1949 at age 20. He then earned his master’s degree in chemistry from Duquesne University and a doctorate in chemistry from the University of Notre Dame.

In 1955, after being recruited to join the Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory, Cochran and his wife, Joan, made their way to Howard County.

The couple were married for 62 years. Joan died in 2015.

Cochran served on the county’s school board from 1964 until 1968, helping to found Howard Community College. He would serve on its board from 1985 to 1991.



*Edward Cochran, fourth from left, then Howard County executive, holds a shovel at the Howard Community College groundbreaking for the physical education complex.  
(Columbia MD Archives)*

HCC President Daria Willis said Cochran was one of the college’s “most steadfast champions throughout his remarkable life.”

“He understood that education was the cornerstone of an equitable, thriving community,” Willis said in a written statement. “His moral courage in advancing school integration, his leadership

during the college's founding, and his lifetime dedication to expanding educational access have shaped the lives of countless Howard County students across three generations."

Cochran was elected to the County Council in 1968 and reelected two years later. He then held the county's top job.

As county executive from 1974 to 1978, Cochran formed the Office of Human Rights, the Office of Aging, the Department of Citizen Services and the Office of Consumer Affairs. He also created subsidized housing for older residents.

In 1978, Cochran was defeated in the Democratic primary for a second term by former Del. J. Hugh Nichols.

After leaving office, Cochran went back to work at the Applied Physics Laboratory in 1979.

## **Range of interests — and family first**

Throughout his life, Cochran found time to pick up new hobbies and always be there for his family. He earned his pilot's license after taking classes at Howard Community College and from private instructors. Chris Cochran remembers flying with his dad around the Chesapeake Bay but also up to Boston and Buffalo, New York. Once, the two flew all the way to the Bahamas.

When Chris Cochran's wife was on bed rest for nine weeks, his father visited daily, bringing her treats like milkshakes. And, after his retirement, Cochran found a new job he loved: babysitting his grandchildren. He was very close to his grandchildren, Watson said.



*Edward Cochran, center, with some of his children and their spouses at the East Columbia 50+ Center after the building's dedication to him. (Courtesy of Courtney Watson)*  
*Even after being out of the limelight for years, Howard County found ways to continue honoring Cochran's legacy.*

At the groundbreaking for the expanded [East Columbia 50+ Center](#) in December 2021, Cochran was the guest of honor. The center was dedicated in his honor.

“I am proud of the results that have been achieved in our county in the past, and I anticipate that the facility we dedicate today will add to that enviable record,” Cochran said at the dedication ceremony.



*Edward Cochran's official county executive portrait. (Howard County Government)*

County Executive Calvin Ball praised Cochran's years of service in a social media post. “We remember Dr. Cochran as a scholar, an educator, a public servant and a committed resident whose work advanced both knowledge and the common good,” Ball wrote. “His example reminds us that earnest dedication, whether in the laboratory or the George Howard Building, can move a community forward.”

After a long day of work at the Applied Physics Laboratory or running Howard County, Cochran would return home to his 1880s farmhouse in Clarksville, affectionately called “Holly Hill,” and spend hours refurbishing it.

“His lifelong passion was to keep that house standing up and keeping it looking prim and proper,” Chris Cochran said.

So much so that Edward Cochran lived independently in his beloved farmhouse until he was 95. He spent his last year in assisted living, but the family still owns the farmhouse.

Chris Cochran and Watson said their father often put them and their four siblings to work on the home, whether it was painting, building fences or putting up wallpaper.

Watson also fondly remembered the elder Cochran pointing out a fox den nestled on the property and all the baby kits. She felt the animals sort of knew her father.

When two large bucks appeared in the front yard of the 10-acre property the day Cochran died, Watson considered it a sign.

“He loved the animals and I think they loved him,” Watson said.

The family welcomes all who knew and loved Edward Cochran Jr. to join them in remembering his life at a funeral Mass at the Shrine of St. Anthony at 2 p.m. Friday and a celebration of life at the Merriweather Lakehouse hotel at noon on Saturday.