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## Former University of Utah President Chase Peterson dies

Academics • University leader kept his hand in medicine.

BY PEGGY FLETCHER STACK

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Chase N. Peterson was most at home on a college campus.

The son of a university president, Peterson spent all but seven of his 84 years enveloped in the life of the mind — as student, professor, dean, researcher, and eventually reaching his father's stature as president.

But Peterson, the former University of Utah president who died in Salt Lake City on Sunday of complications from pneumonia, also relished the physical touch of medicine.

"Chase began his career as a physician," recalled longtime friend Bob Huefner. "He loved his patients and they loved him."

He ended his career "as a teaching and practicing physician," working at Utah's Fourth Street Clinic for the homeless, Huefner noted, "emphasizing medicine's human aspects."

Peterson grew up in Logan, where his father, E.G. Peterson, presided over Utah State University. The precocious boy went to a prestigious boarding school in Massachusetts, then to Harvard as an undergraduate, finally earning a medical degree there.

"He was so proud of being this Mormon kid who went out in the world," Peterson's wife, Grethe Ballif Peterson, said Sunday. "His roots made it possible for him to do what he did."

After practicing medicine back in the Beehive State, Peterson returned to Harvard in 1967 as the dean of admissions.

It was a turbulent time of student riots and racial tensions.

Peterson chose "to hire an African-American to be part of the admissions staff, to use African-Americans in recruiting and in other ways try to affirm the university's support and inclusion of African-Americans without actual quotas," according to a story in the Harvard Gazette, when Peterson received a medal "for extraordinary service."

In 1978, the Mormon administrator was lured back to Utah to take charge of health sciences at the U., where he worked tirelessly to establish what has now become a nationally recognized center of medical research.

"Chase served superbly in the role," said David P. Gardner, the U. president who brought Peterson back. "He was instrumental in building the university's research capability, especially as it related to genetics research."

During that time, the U. hospital implanted the first artificial heart in Barney Clark, who lived 112 days with the device before dying.

When Gardner left to become president of the University of California in 1983, Peterson succeeded him as university president.

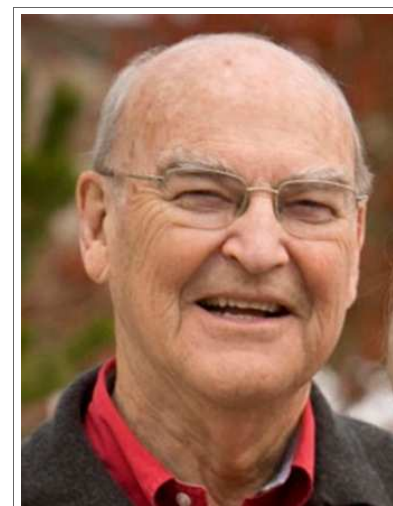
"Chase was a person of very strong character and unimpeachable honesty," said Gardner, who is retired and living in Park City. "He was wholly committed to the university, devoting his entire working hours in its behalf."

Under Peterson's leadership, the campus saw "a substantial growth," Gardner said. "He was admired and respected by students and colleagues alike."

He was "one of the first U. presidents to hold open office hours for students," Grethe Peterson said. "He wanted to know what they thought and felt."

Her husband, she said, had a "generosity of spirit that always worried about other people's comfort."

Peterson was also a risk taker, which sometimes backfired.



Chase N. Peterson, former president of the University of Utah. Courtesy photo

In 1989, he enthusiastically announced a breakthrough in cold fusion, the hypothetical process where a nuclear reaction takes place at room temperature. The research by Martin Fleischmann and Stanley Pons was rejected by much of the scientific community and not immediately replicable.

“Chase Peterson fostered that special character of the University as a place where your fellow faculty were colleagues, not competitors,” Raymond Gesteland of the U.’s human genetics department said Sunday. “He kept a delicate balance between the arts and the sciences. In his role in the medical sciences and as president, he recruited scientists who came to the University because they saw it as an ideal place to build a successful career.

“His skillful negotiations brought major support from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute which, in collaboration with the Eccles family, built a world class genetics institute.”

Peterson retired as president in 1991, but he stayed involved with the university, particularly the medical school, where he gave his last lecture on July 21.

“He was aware of all the parts and people that keep an academic institution running,” said daughter Erika Munson. “He understood everything, from the most brilliant professors to the workers who kept the buildings running. He was able to connect with all of them.”

Peterson, with his endless curiosity and openness, “felt he had something to learn from everybody,” Munson said.

He is survived by his wife, three children, 14 grandchildren and one great-grandchild.

Funeral arrangements are pending.

pstack@sltrib.com

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