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Former counseling services director for MCSD dies at 89

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Bedingfield

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James W. Bedingfield helped establish special education center

James W. Bedingfield, former director of counseling services for the Muscogee County School District and who helped to establish the Woodall Psychoeducational Center, died Friday after an extended illness. He was 89.

Bedingfield set the foundation to help children with behavior and emotional needs when the Woodall Center opened in 1975.

"He loved kids and loved helping kids," said his daughter Cheryl Tate. "He was in education all his life. He had a very positive way of working with them."

Homer Wells, who worked under Bedingfield and later served as director at the center, said he was inspired by him to continue in the field of special education.

"He was sincere, honest and a very honorable person," Wells said. "When he said something, you could pretty much count on it. The program here was one of the first to be funded for children with behavior and emotional problems."

Visitation is set for 10 a.m. Monday at Striffler-Hamby Mortuary on Macon Road, Columbus, and the funeral will follow at 11 a.m. at the chapel. After the service, burial will be at Parkhill Cemetery.

Born Nov. 14, 1922, in Laurens County, Ga., Bedingfield grew up on a farm in Caldwell. He played high school football and basketball and held state records for high jump and discus for many years. He attracted the interest of a baseball scout but that dream was put on hold when Pearl Harbor was bombed in 1941 and war erupted.

He joined the Marines after high school and completed basic training at Parris Island, S.C. After more training at Camp Pendleton, Calif., and Camp Maui, Hawaii, Bedingfield was part of invasions on the Pacific Islands of Roi Namur, Saipan, Tinian and Iwo Jima. From a group of 42 men in his platoon landing on Iwo Jima, Bedingfield was one of seven to survive. For his actions on the battlefield, he was awarded the Purple Heart, Bronze Star, Silver Star, Gold Star and promoted from sergeant to second lieutenant on Iwo Jima.

He left the Marines in 1945 and enrolled at the University of Georgia where he earned a bachelor's and master's degree in psychology.

After a year as teacher in Oglethorpe, Ga., he came to Columbus in 1950 after talking with Muscogee superintendent William Henry Shaw. He first served as principal of Midland Elementary School and later was assigned to East Highland as principal.

Bedingfield took a break in early 1960s to continue studies at University of Florida. He earned his doctorate in 1964, the year he was assigned the role of guidance director of the school system. Bedingfield also administered GED tests and talked with students about possibilities for a career.

In 1973, he contacted the coordinator of the Georgia Psychoeducational Network about expanding services in the area to serve the psychologically or emotionally undeveloped child. The center opened in January 1975, with Bedingfield as coordinator of the Children Services Center at Woodall School on Third Avenue. It served eight counties, including Chattahoochee, Clay, Harris, Muscogee, Quitman, Randolph, Stewart and Talbot.

"The only place society has to deal with its citizens is the public schools," Bedingfield said before the center opened. "For many years, we've failed to respond to students' psychological or emotional needs."

In 1981, the center was moved to the former Harrison Avenue School to serve more children and its name was changed to Woodall Psychoeducational Center. He retired in 1982.

"I was there when he retired," Wells said. "He was such a great inspiration to me."

Survivors include his wife Mikel, a son, Carl, and three daughters, Carol, Cheryl and Charisse; 12 grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.

Donations may go to Camp Joy ministry of the Valley Rescue Mission.

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