

ACM'S FOUNDING PRESIDENT DIES IN VIRGINIA, WHERE HE HAD RETIRED

CUMBERLAND, Md. – Dr. Robert S. Zimmer, the founding president of Allegany College of Maryland, died Monday, Oct. 26, in McGuire Veterans Hospital in Richmond, Va., after a brief illness. He was 85.

Zimmer, who opened Allegany County's community college in 1961, led an impressive and varied three-decades-long career in higher education before his retirement in 1981. He had lived in Williamsburg since 1990.

Zimmer was dean of evening credit programs at then-Montgomery Junior College when the county Board of Education asked him to start Allegany Community College in the former Carver School in Cumberland.

The mission was a tall order as Zimmer had short notice to develop academic programs, recruit faculty, hire staff, schedule classes and enroll students. The one-month timeframe included readying the disused Frederick Street building for the college's needs.

ACM, as it has been known since 1996, opened on time in fall 1961 with 102 students, six faculty members and academic programs geared primarily for transfer to four-year colleges.

As the young college developed, liberal arts and sciences and engineering and business curricula were offered, fine and performing arts shows were conducted and athletics was started with a basketball team.

Zimmer enlisted community support, speaking to service clubs and other groups, to further establish the college and solidify its role. "We had to sell the idea of higher education," he said in a 2005 visit to the college.

From the outset Zimmer decided to seek accreditation from the Middle States Association of Schools and Colleges. The goal was achieved in four years, making ACM only the second Maryland community college to earn that distinction.

He pointed to this accomplishment as one of his most memorable experiences in Cumberland. "It proved that we as a college had come of age – matured," he observed. "And that Western Maryland could ... have a quality institution."

As it came into its own, the college formed an independent board of trustees (in 1965) and deemed its first home as insufficient. Zimmer was active in efforts to buy land on Willowbrook Road and fully engaged in plans to develop a new suburban campus.

The 1969 move to a new, multi-building campus on Cumberland's East Side allowed the college to offer a wider variety of transfer and career programs to benefit more students,

setting the stage for near-continuous growth to this day. The institution's credit-student enrollment topped 4,000 for the first time this fall.

However, Zimmer did not move with the college to its present home; in 1967, community leaders in Kankakee, Ill., learned of his start-up abilities and asked him to found a junior college there. Kankakee Community College was the result.

Several years later Paterson, N.J., leaders asked Zimmer to launch a public college in their northern county. Passaic County Community College, founded in 1970, was the outcome.

Zimmer's reputation as a start-up veteran reached the U.S. Department of Defense, which recruited him to the fledgling Community College of the Air Force. As director of postsecondary education at the Pentagon, Zimmer wrote legislation to give it degree-granting authority and was instrumental in earning accreditation.

He also served as professor at the National War College at Fort McNair in Washington, D.C. His work added 5 ½ years of active-duty military service to his World War II experience, which included service in a U.S. Army tank battalion that fought in the Battle of the Bulge and helped liberate an Austrian concentration camp. He retired as a colonel in the Air Force Reserve in 1981.

ACM paid tribute to Zimmer in 2005 for his work to establish the community college in his role as founding president. A plaque that was unveiled then was hung in the foyer of the college library beside one that commemorates the 1969 founding of the campus.

He was accompanied by his wife, June, who survives him, as does a son, Chip, of Hagerstown, and a daughter, Cindy Stenger of Williamsburg, Va. The Zimmers, who were married 61 years, are the grandparents of four. He is also survived by a brother, Martin, of Clinton, Mo.

A native of West Seneca, N.Y., near Buffalo, Zimmer earned a bachelor's degree from Brockport (N.Y.) State College, where he starred on the basketball team and graduated in 1947.

He later earned master's and doctoral degrees from the University of Chicago and spent nine years in the Chicago City Junior College System, where he was director of student personnel and registration.

Active in Williamsburg United Methodist Church, Zimmer was a Mason and a Shriner. In Cumberland he was active in LaVale United Methodist Church, the Cumberland Lions Club, Explorers Post 10 and the Ali Ghan Shrine, where he remained a member.

A memorial service with military and Masonic honors will be held at 2 p.m. Friday, Oct. 30, in his church. Private interment will be in Woodlawn Cemetery, Orchard Park, N.Y.

In lieu of flowers the family requests donations to the church or to Shriners Hospital for Children in care of Khedive Temple, 645 Woodlake Dr., Chesapeake, Va., 23320.