

Jack Martin Mills, 88, of Columbia, SC passed away on Saturday, June 8, 2024 after a courageous struggle with declining health. Jack was born on October 27, 1935 to James William Mills and Mary Cornelia Waller Mills in Patrick County, VA.

Jack was a self-made man. As a young man, he entered the world of telecommunications. He started out with Pike Electric in Mount Airy, NC “climbing poles and splicing cable” and later moved on to Black Industries. He excelled in this business and because of his strong work ethic, he went far. Eventually, he started his own cable contracting businesses (ultimately Mills Communications), got his pilot’s license and traveled all over the Southeast installing phone and television cable. He was good at what he did and very proud of his work. If you were to visit his home today, you’d see that, although he sold the businesses and moved on, his days of “stringing cables” always remained a huge part of him as evidenced through his vast collection of insulators, various tools he had on display and proud stories he would tell.

Those who knew Jack knew that he never met a stranger. It was even said of him that he was “just two telephone calls away from anyone in the world” and it was the truth. Because of Jack’s personality and natural ability to connect with anybody, his list of friends was very long and ranged from the next-door neighbor to people like Kirk Douglas, Tony Bennett, Bill Clinton, Junior Johnson and Jeff Gordon. He not only was friends with these people, he used his connections to get things done. One example of that was when he served on the Board for the Township Auditorium and, after they renovated the auditorium in 2010, he was instrumental in getting Tony Bennett to come play a concert for their grand re-opening weekend. Another time, he enlisted Jeff Gordon and Donald Trump to do pro bono advertising appearances for the United States Tennis Association.

One of Jack’s passions in life was tennis. He first became involved with tennis in 1973 when his son, Tony, came home upset about a draw in a tournament. Being a supportive father, Jack went to see about it and the rest became history. From that moment, he became involved in tennis and remained involved the rest of his life. He not only played tennis, he had a long and distinguished career as a volunteer with the United States Tennis Association for over 40 years. His first official job with the USTA was a State Selector in 1976. He worked a great deal at the local level and was very proud of his role in starting league tennis in Columbia. In 1977, he was elected President of the South Carolina Tennis Association followed by President of the USTA Southern Section in 1988. He also served as Regional Vice President for the USTA for a time. Jack was a charter member of the South Carolina Tennis Patrons Foundation. He served on the USTA League Committee and chaired the Sanction and Schedules Committee as well as the Public Affairs Committee. In 1993, he was a member of the US Open Committee and chaired the US Open Project Committee during the planning and construction of Arthur Ashe Stadium and the renovation of Louis Armstrong Stadium in New York. He represented the USTA on the ITF Olympic Committee before and during the 1996 games in Atlanta and was an advisor to the

Atlanta Committee focusing on the construction of the tennis stadium and complex. Jack was inducted into the SC Tennis Hall of Fame in 1990 and the Southern Tennis Hall of Fame in 2009. He also received the USTA Southern Touchstone Award in 1991. A few years ago, the Jack Mills Scholarship Endowment was established by Mills' friends and admirers from South Carolina, the Southern Section of the USTA and the nation to recognize his lifetime of contributions to the sport of tennis. These scholarships are distributed by the Southern Tennis Foundation to help deserving students offset expenses during their four years at a college or university.

In addition to his tennis life, Jack's list of volunteerism, service and accolades is long. In 2002, he received the Order of the Palmetto, South Carolina's highest civilian award. He served as Chairman of the Advisory Board for the College of Hospitality, Retail and Sports Management at the University of South Carolina. He also served on the Board for the Township Auditorium in Columbia, where he worked tirelessly toward its renovation and revitalization. He was appointed a member of the President's Council on Physical Fitness & Sports and a board member of PE4Life. He was named one of the 25 most influential sports figures in South Carolina and listed among SC's top 100 sports figures for the millennium.

Jack was also a huge fan of NASCAR. His love for stock car racing began as a young child in North Carolina when he and his friends would climb over the fences to watch. Later, they would all pile into a car and drive to Bowman Gray in Winston Salem to take in the races. In his adult life, one of his prides was his NASCAR "hard card" he got each year that allowed him full access anywhere around the track. He loved the sport, but really he loved the people more. In true Jack fashion, he talked to everyone and became well-known around the track and the NASCAR world. He took great pleasure in taking people to the races with him and letting them see the sport "the Jack way".

Finally, Jack was an avid reader and lover of the written word. One of his greatest joys was to share books or poetry with the people that he knew. It was amazing the number of poems he had committed to memory and he could recite them word for word. One of his favorites was "The Bridge Builder" by Will Allen Dromgoole that speaks of an old man building a bridge to pave the way for the generations that came behind him. Another favorite was Longfellow's "A Psalm of Life". He could recite every word of this poem, but his favorite stanzas were these:

"Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time;

Footprints, that perhaps another,
Sailing o're life's solemn main,
A forlorn and shipwrecked brother,
Seeing, shall take heart again.

Let us, then, be up and doing,
With a heart for any fate;
Still achieving, still pursuing,
Learn to labor and to wait.”

Jack lived his life just as these poems suggest. The life he lived and the work he did certainly built bridges and paved the way for many generations to come and he no doubt left “footprints on the sands of time” that can never be erased.

Jack is survived by his loving wife, Erin; sons Lee (Judy) Mills of Mount Airy, NC and Tony Mills of Los Angeles, CA; step-daughter, Darlene Davis-Byrd (Jimmy) of Franklin, NC; four grandchildren Clay Mills, Corey (Ashley) Mills, Dylan Ortega and Elli Davis; and seven great-grandchildren; Shari Wash of Batesburg, SC; Jim (Deana) Wash of Winnsboro, SC; Brett (Lisa) Wash of Batesburg, SC; and a number of cousins, nieces and nephews. He was predeceased by his parents; sisters Lena Cook, Mary Taylor, Alice Johnson, Ruby Johnson and Hope Bateman; and brothers Bill Mills and Ed Mills.

Services celebrating Jack's life will be announced at a later date. Memorials may be made to the Jack Mills Scholarship Fund, The Southern Tennis Foundation, 5685 Spalding Drive, Peachtree Corners, GA 30092.