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Walter M. Phillips Jr., 76, prosecutor of corrupt politicians

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After his youthful baseball ambitions were sidelined, Phillips went to law school and returned to Philadelphia in 1966, taking a job with newly elected District Attorney Arlen Specter. There, he joined a vanguard of prosecutors pursuing public corruption cases after decades of inaction. (FILE)

Jeremy Roebuck, Inquirer Staff Writer

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Walter M. Phillips Jr., 76, a tireless prosecutor whose efforts to root out public corruption in the 1970s shook the foundations of Philadelphia's Democratic politics, died Saturday, Feb. 7, of complications from earlier open-heart surgery.

His career as a city, state, and federal prosecutor pitted him against New York mobsters and politicians such as former Pennsylvania State Sen. Henry J. "Buddy" Cianfrani.

His drive to pursue graft at all costs at times laid him low,



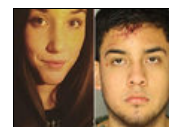
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such as when he turned his investigative zeal on officials close to the administration that appointed him - and later fired him - as a state special prosecutor charged with rooting out police and political corruption in the city.

Ironically, the Democratic machine that cast Mr. Phillips out of that job in 1976 recruited him four years later to run for attorney general and later district attorney. Both bids for public office were unsuccessful. Even later in life, colleagues said, Mr. Phillips' commitment to fairness in politics and the criminal justice system never wavered. He served on various state-appointed committees that advocated for establishment of drug and veterans' courts and helped usher in widespread reforms to Philadelphia courts.

"I never met, in public or private life, a guy with greater integrity than Wally," said former Gov. Ed Rendell, a close friend who picked Mr. Phillips to chair his administration's Commission on Crime and Delinquency. "He cared very much about doing things the right way for the right reason. He was as impactful a person in the public arena as you can be without being an elected official."

Inquirer editor William K. Marimow, who covered Mr. Phillips' last days as the state's special prosecutor in the 1970s, described him as an "idealist with high ideals."

"He was a guy that really, truly believed in integrity in government and a criminal justice system that dispensed equal justice for everyone," Marimow said. "And, unlike a lot of other principled Philadelphians, he wasn't afraid to trumpet what he believed."

Integrity and public service were ideals instilled in Mr. Phillips at a young age. His father, Walter Sr., was one of the civic leaders who led a reform movement in the late 1940s and early '50s that led to the election of Mayors Joseph S. Clark Jr. and Richardson Dilworth.

Growing up in Torresdale on what was then a 26-acre farm on the Delaware River, the future prosecutor had other career ambitions.

In his teens and early 20s, Mr. Phillips was a Major League pitching prospect. He was a star pitcher for Princeton and signed a pro contract with the Houston organization when it was the Colt .45s and before it became the Astros. A shoulder injury ended those pro baseball dreams.

Throughout his life, Mr. Phillips remained a dedicated athlete - as likely in recent years to be defeating young lawyers one-third his age on the tennis court as to be spotted preparing himself for his next marathon. Three years ago, Mr. Phillips headed to Tanzania for an epic climb up Mount Kilimanjaro, said his wife, actress and author Valerie Ogden Phillips.

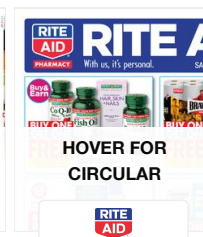
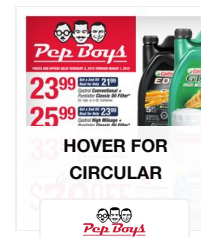
"You couldn't keep him still," she said. "He loved sports and



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After his youthful baseball ambitions were sidelined, Mr. Phillips went to law school and returned to Philadelphia in 1966, taking a job with newly elected District Attorney Arlen Specter. He joined a vanguard of prosecutors pursuing public-corruption cases after decades of inaction.

His successes soon earned him a job in the U.S. Attorney's Office in Manhattan, where he worked alongside a young Rudy Giuliani. Mr. Phillips' pursuit of Bill Bonanno, son of New York mob boss Joseph Bonanno, attracted the attention of author Gay Talese and landed Mr. Phillips a place in Talese's best-selling book *Honor Thy Father*.

But it was Pennsylvania Gov. Milton J. Shapp's decision to appoint Mr. Phillips to investigate corruption among Philadelphia police and public officials in 1974 that cemented his public profile as an anticorruption scourge.

"The thing with Wally is that he viewed everything as a crusade," Rendell said. "When he was convinced he was right - and he was almost always convinced he was right - he was always passionate about what he was doing and what the end goals were."

In two years, Mr. Phillips brought 59 corruption cases. However, his efforts at prosecution were often stymied by the courts and members of the city's political and judicial establishment who feared their old way of doing business was coming to an end.

Throughout much of the period, Mr. Phillips' biggest adversary was Cianfrani. The powerful Democratic state senator eventually persuaded the state attorney general to fire Mr. Phillips in 1976 for leaking stories to the press.

"If he can't get me," Cianfrani gloated at the time, "what kind of investigator is he?"

Booted from his job, Mr. Phillips sent his case file on the senator to federal prosecutors, who sent Cianfrani to prison for five years on racketeering, bribery, and obstruction-of-justice charges.

When city Democrats later selected Mr. Phillips to run for district attorney in 1989, Cianfrani, then a ward leader, begrudgingly endorsed him.

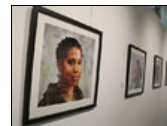
"If Hitler were the endorsed candidate, I would support him," he told *The Inquirer* that year.

Mr. Phillips lost the election and left his ambitions for elected office behind. He focused his attentions on influencing the justice system from spots on various government commissions and committees.

He continued to work in private practice for decades, most recently at the Center City law firm Obermayer Rebmann



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Maxwell & Hippel. Even there, firm chairman Thomas A. Leonard said, he was known to call up local and federal prosecutors to offer them pointers on pursuing corruption cases.

"He just thought that the privilege of public service required that you do it with total and complete integrity," Leonard said. "You focus every fiber of your body on doing what's right and just. When someone violated that public trust, in his mind, you had to go after them."

In addition to his wife, Mr. Phillips is survived by his children, Graham Phillips and Serena Sterling; three grandchildren; and siblings Anna Sofaer and Francis Phillips.

A celebration of his life will be held at noon Saturday, May 2, at his family farm in Solebury.

jroebuck@phillynews.com

215-854-2608

@jeremyroebuck

Jeremy Roebuck
Inquirer Staff Writer

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