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Richard M. DeVos, Amway Co-Founder and G.O.P. Stalwart, Dies at 92

By **Keith Schneider**

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Richard M. DeVos, the Amway Corporation co-founder who built and used one of the 20th century's great personal fortunes to bolster the Republican Party, restore civic vitality to his hometown, Grand Rapids, Mich., and buy the Orlando Magic of the National Basketball Association, died on Thursday. He was 92.

His death, at his home in Ada, Mich., was caused by complications of an infection, according to a statement on the Magic's website.

An evangelical Christian who espoused the virtues of self-reliance, capitalism and the free market, Mr. DeVos was above all a superb salesman. He joined Jay Van Andel, his friend and business partner for 55 years, in marketing the concept of direct sales and turned the privately owned Amway Corporation into a global enterprise with more than \$8.6 billion in sales in 2017, more than 17,000 employees and hundreds of thousands of independent salespeople.

At his death, Mr. DeVos and his family had an estimated net worth of \$5.5 billion. His daughter-in-law Betsy DeVos is education secretary in the Trump administration.

As his wealth increased, so did Mr. DeVos's prominence as a political strategist and donor to the Republican Party and conservative organizations. He supported the Heritage Foundation, the Federalist Society and Focus on the Family, and he was a member of the executive committee of the Council for National Policy, which, starting in the early 1980s, pushed to propel Christian values to the center of Republican activities nationally.

In the 1990s, the Amway Corporation spent \$2.5 million a year on Republican candidates and party activities, making it the largest corporate political donor in the country. Mr. DeVos, who cultivated political allies with the deftness of a senior statesman, had also served as finance chairman of the Republican National Committee.

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In 1996 he was honored at a \$3 million Republican fund-raising event in Washington at which former Senator Bob Dole extolled his influence in the anti-abortion movement and in compelling the party to embrace evangelical doctrine to build a political majority.

President Gerald R. Ford, a native of Grand Rapids, was one of Mr. DeVos's friends. Mr. DeVos also advised Presidents Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush and George W. Bush. He was a member of Reagan's AIDS commission and helped develop the weekly presidential radio address when he agreed to carry Reagan's Saturday noon broadcasts on the Mutual Broadcasting System, which was then owned by Amway.

Mr. DeVos's ideas about "compassionate capitalism," which were explored in his 1994 book by the same title, were an important source for George W. Bush's "compassionate conservatism" campaign slogan in 2000.

Mr. DeVos was an engaged philanthropist, particularly for educational, religious and civic projects in Grand Rapids, where he was born and raised. Calvin College in Grand Rapids, which he attended, was a beneficiary of Mr. DeVos's gift-giving, as was the Christian Reformed Church.

In recent years Grand Rapids, Michigan's second-largest city, has experienced a civic and business revival in large part because of the investments that Mr. DeVos and Mr. Van Andel made to restore historic structures.

In addition, a new downtown campus for Grand Valley State University, a new civic center and the DeVos Children's Hospital, regarded as one of the leading pediatric hospitals in the nation, all bear Mr. DeVos's name.



Mr. DeVos in 2009 after the Orlando Magic, which he owned, defeated the Cleveland Cavaliers in the N.B.A. playoffs. He bought the team for \$80 million in 1991. Elsa/Getty Images

Mr. DeVos bought the Orlando Magic for \$80 million in 1991, in part because he saw that owning an N.B.A. team would provide a more visible platform for what Pat Williams, his biographer and now a senior vice president of the team, said was “his message of success through faith, optimism, perseverance and hard work.”

Mr. DeVos regularly spoke to his players and counseled many of them, including Shaquille O’Neal.

Since the purchase, the team has won five division championships and two Eastern Conference titles but has not won a championship. In 1998, Mr. DeVos purchased the Orlando Miracle of the W.N.B.A.

Richard Marvin DeVos was born in Grand Rapids on March 4, 1926, to Simon and Ethel (Dekker) DeVos. He attributed much of his entrepreneurial spirit and his down-to-earth personal style to his father, an electrician who was fired after years on the job and died of a heart attack in 1962, when he was just 59.

“Own your own business son,” his father had advised. “Own it. Work hard at it. Set high goals for yourself and never give up, no matter what.”

Mr. DeVos met Mr. Van Andel, his future business partner, as a student at the private Grand Rapids Christian High School. Mr. Van Andel was two years older and owned a car, and Mr. DeVos paid his friend 25 cents a week for a ride to school and back. During those rides the two discussed someday forming a business.

They both attended Calvin College, where Mr. DeVos met Helen Van Wesep, whom he married in 1953.

Mr. DeVos and Mr. Van Andel left college to serve in the Army Air Corps during World War II. When they returned, they started Wolverine Air Service, their first joint venture. Several more businesses followed, including a failed charter schooner service, which almost led to their drowning, as well as a drive-in restaurant and a distributorship for a California-based marketer of vitamins and nutritional products.

That last experience led to the founding in 1959 of the Amway Corporation, which used a similar manufacturing and direct sales strategy to market household products, including their first, a biodegradable detergent.

Mr. DeVos was the company's president, chief salesman and cheerleader. Mr. Van Andel, who died in 2004, was the chairman and managed the business. By the 1980s, Amway had achieved sales of \$1 billion a year worldwide through its strategy of relying on individual distributors to sell products and recruit new salespeople.

Critics had called the strategy a pyramid scheme, and in 1975 the Federal Trade Commission accused it of being just that. But the commission dropped the charge and declared the company's business strategy a legal multilevel marketing approach.

Mr. DeVos is survived by three sons, Dick (Betsy DeVos's husband), Dan and Doug; a daughter, Cheri DeVos; two sisters, Bernice Heys and Janice Courts; 16 grandchildren; and eight great-grandchildren. His wife died in 2017.

Dick DeVos succeeded his father as president of Amway in 1993 and was followed by Doug DeVos in 2002. Steve Van Andel succeeded his father as chairman. In 2000 the families established Alticor, a new parent company, and Amway became one of three subsidiaries.

Mr. DeVos, who was hampered by health problems much of his adult life, underwent a successful heart transplant in 1997. The experience deepened his religious belief and business fervor and led him to write five inspirational and autobiographical books and to give motivational speeches.

"My dad inspired me to believe that there are opportunities all around us," he said. "We can seize them whenever they come our way. So if you fail at something, you don't have to despair. There's another opportunity for success just around the corner."

Daniel E. Slotnik contributed reporting.