

Billionaire Kluge buried in modest pine casket



Billionaire John W. Kluge is laid to rest.

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Billionaire philanthropist John W. Kluge was laid to rest in a modest pine box Tuesday afternoon at a ceremony that was alternately spirited and meditative.

Kluge, who would have turned 96 on Tuesday, died Sept. 7 at his home in Albemarle County.

He was buried in a shady glen at Monticello Memorial Gardens, across the street from Michie Tavern. More than 400 friends and family members attended the service, many of whom praised Kluge's generosity, kindness and wisdom.

Kluge — a German immigrant who at one point owned an empire of seven TV stations, 14 radio stations, outdoor advertising, the Harlem Globetrotters and the Ice Capades — was ranked as America's wealthiest person in the late 1980s and early 1990s until Microsoft's Bill Gates knocked him from that perch in 1992. Forbes Magazine listed Kluge as the nation's 35th richest American last year with an estimated net worth of \$6.5 billion.

He was not only one of the nation's richest people, he was also one of the most generous.

He gave more than \$63 million to the University of Virginia, including funds to create professorships in end-of-life care and to establish the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection that features 1,600 pieces of art from his personal collection. He donated his 7,400-acre Albemarle County estate, including historic Morven Farm and 10 additional working farms, to UVA in 2001.

In 2007, Kluge pledged \$400 million to Columbia University, his alma mater, to support financial aid. It was the fourth largest single gift to an American institution of higher education in history.

Kluge also gave millions to Columbia to establish scholarships for minority students and to expand the school's faculty diversity.

One recipient of Kluge's scholarships at Columbia was Jonathan Paul Walton, a spoken word poet who performed at Kluge's memorial service.

Walton performed a poem called “Change of Plan” that he performed at the “inner peace variety show” at the Paramount Theater four years ago to benefit Hiromi T'ai Chi.

“John and Tussi were there in the third row,” he said. “I called him Mr. Kluge. I was scared to death to call him John.”

Walton pointed to Kluge’s \$400 million gift in support of financial aid at Columbia and asked the memorial service’s crowd to do as Kluge did and help others in any way they can.

“What if we lived in a little bit of the gospel that he lived every day?” Walton said.

Kluge last spoke to Walton on Aug. 22, telling him to “continue to dream, continue to create,” Walton recalled. “Put your money on the table,” he said.

“I would encourage all of you today to put your dreams on the table,” Walton said.

No one from Kluge’s family spoke at the outdoor service. Only Walton and meditation expert Jon Kabat-Zinn shared their memories.

Kabat-Zinn — who knew Kluge for the last decade of his life and is recognized as a leading advocate of “mindfulness meditation” as a means to reduce stress — led the crowd in quiet meditations on Kluge’s generosity and spirit, urging attendees to imagine ways they might honor his memory with service or some other way in their own lives.

“What would John urge you to ante up, in terms of your life, to live in a way that might be informed by how he dared to live and how he dared to be?” Kabat-Zinn said.

The service was hardly just somber and contemplative, however.

As guests arrived, they were greeted by hymns sung by the gospel choir of Mount Zion First African Baptist Church. Harpist Eve Waters performed as well, playing songs including Sting’s “Fields of Gold.”