

Seattle man who helped launch Microsoft left \$65M for gay rights

February 24, 2008

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Ric Weiland, who helped his friends Bill Gates and Paul Allen launch Microsoft, was a quiet philanthropist. But his final gift has provided one of the most powerful financial boosts ever to the gay-rights movement.

Weiland has left \$65 million to the Pride Foundation in Seattle and 10 nonprofit organizations, believed to be the largest estate gift ever given to the gay and lesbian community in the U.S.

His generosity didn't stop there.

Weiland left \$160 million, the majority of his estate, to charity. That includes a gift to Stanford University estimated to be worth \$60 million, which the university said is the largest bequest it has ever received. Weiland also gave significant amounts toward environmental protection and scientific research.

Weiland, one of the first five Microsoft employees, committed suicide in 2006 at age 53.

It has taken more than a year to sort out his estate, and the full scope of Weiland's giving is now starting to emerge. The first disbursements began last summer and will be completed sometime this year.

For the Pride Foundation, which has an annual budget of \$2.5 million and endowment of \$3 million, Weiland's gift of more than \$19 million will significantly expand its efforts throughout the Northwest.

The money will support anti-discrimination campaigns and programs to help youths, develop future leaders and provide scholarships.

"It's a gigantic investment in our equal-rights movement," said Zan McColloch-Lussier, the Pride Foundation's director of communications. "It will be here long after our kids' kids are gone."

Weiland gave another \$46 million to the Pride Foundation to distribute to 10 national organizations over eight years.

Recipients will include the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Network, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, the American Foundation for AIDS Research and the **National Gay and Lesbian Task Force**. For most of them, the bequest is the largest gift in their history.

"My hope is this will inspire others to engage as donors and volunteers," said Audrey Haberman, the foundation's executive director.

Weiland started out giving small donations to the Pride Foundation 18 years ago, contributing a total of \$3 million during his lifetime. He also did volunteer work and served on the board of directors.

The nonprofit Pride Foundation supports the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community with grants, scholarships and leadership-development programs.

With Weiland's gift, Pride becomes the largest such foundation in the country.

Weiland's other beneficiaries include Lakeside High School, Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center, the United Way, The Nature Conservancy and three other environmental groups.

Solace in giving

Weiland was hardly a typical Microsoft millionaire.

He shunned the spotlight, refusing to be singled out on donor-recognition lists. Friends say he wrestled with the burden of wealth that came almost by accident, and thought deeply about how to give his life meaning.

Weiland, who suffered from chronic depression, found great solace in his philanthropic projects.

"I've never met someone with such a thoughtful personal agenda that was at the same time not about himself," said Thatcher Bailey, a high-school classmate and friend. "It was about how he can be a good citizen."

News of Weiland's bequest brought a sense of hope to people still coping with the tragedy of his death. His suicide shocked even his closest friends, who didn't realize how ill Weiland had become. That was the nature of his private personality, Haberman said.

"People knew him for years and years, but upon his death didn't really know him very well," she said.

Weiland grew up in the Seward Park neighborhood of Seattle, where he was an altar boy at a local Lutheran church. His father worked as an engineer at Boeing and his mother volunteered at Swedish Hospital.

Weiland built a computer in his basement when he was in eighth grade and sold his first software program for \$5,000 at age 16.

He befriended Gates and Allen at Lakeside High School, where the trio and another friend formed the Lakeside Programming Group.

A few years later, when Gates and Allen started Microsoft in Albuquerque, Weiland took time off from his studies at Stanford to help. He was hired full-time as general manager after graduation,

eventually becoming a lead programmer. Later, he helped design and write Microsoft Works, the company's word-processing and spreadsheet software still used today.

In 1988, Weiland retired a rich man at the age of 35.

Not long afterward, he crossed paths with his former classmate Bailey, who was fundraising for the Pride Foundation.

"He was trying to come to grips with the fact that he had been at the right place at the right time and ended up with a lot of resources," Bailey said.

But unlike many people at Microsoft, "he didn't have that hard-driving, competitive edge. At some level he had a deeper questioning about how to be in the world."

Weiland read voraciously about strategies for effective philanthropy, and he grew from being a small donor into a powerful advocate, using his investments for social change, Bailey said.

Highly organized, Weiland's filing cabinets were thick with reports from nonprofits he supported, which numbered close to 70.

He "delighted our science team when he asked for more technical information, a request nearly as rare as an ivory-billed woodpecker sighting," said David Weekes, Washington director of The Nature Conservancy.

Weiland worked on shareholder campaigns to get McDonald's, GE, Wal-Mart and Emerson to bar sexual-orientation discrimination in the workplace. And he was an early investor in PlanetOut, an online media company focused on the gay community.

"Yes I am"

His experience at Microsoft helped him bridge the gap between activist organizations and the corporate world.

Weiland was extremely shy and uncomfortable in the spotlight. But at a GE shareholders meeting in 1999, he stood up in front of 2,000 people and urged the company to add sexual orientation to its nondiscrimination policy, which it did the following year.

Weiland, who admired the company and its chairman, Jack Welch, contrasted the situation at GE with Microsoft.

"From the beginning there was no secret about my sexual orientation, because Bill Gates and Paul Allen had known me for a number of years already," he said in his GE speech. "Luckily for me, I knew what they were interested in was the quality of my work, not whether I dated someone of the same sex."

In case anyone wondered, Weiland drove a red Corvette around Albuquerque during the early Microsoft days with the license plate "yes I am," Bill Gates recalled at Weiland's memorial service last year.

"Ric was a very talented person who helped get me going on software," Gates wrote in a memorial book. "He was also a great friend."

Weiland wanted more people to enjoy the ease he felt living in Seattle, so in recent years he focused on helping gays find acceptance in small towns and rural areas of the Northwest. He traveled around the region to meet local leaders and worked with the foundation to sponsor events.

"He was quite touched by people in those communities that were able to be out," Haberman said. Many young people outside urban areas feel isolated and turn to the Internet for support because they have no safe place to meet like-minded people, she said.

Weiland lived in Wallingford with his partner, Mike Schaefer, and Kofi, the Bernese Mountain Dog they brought home as a puppy.

Weiland kept himself busy reading, exercising and planning his quarterly and annual gifts, Schaefer recalled. Still, he would fall into bouts of depression, punctuated by terrifying nightmares.

On those mornings, he walked with his dog along Lake Union, trying to clear his head.

"Depression still carries such a social stigma," Schaefer said. Although Weiland had the best medical care, "he didn't want people to know about his suffering."

The deaths of his father and sister started a downhill spiral from which he never recovered, Schaefer said. He lost his mother in 1998, his father in 2004 and his only sister in 2005.

Even when he felt down, he delved into philanthropy projects with zeal.

"It was a godsend," Schaefer said.

Inspiring others

Most of Weiland's estate gifts are unrestricted, allowing the institutions flexibility to apply funds where they need them most.

For the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, which works on campaigns to advance equal-rights legislation, his gift will build something the organization has never had in 35 years — an adequate reserve fund.

For Lambda Legal, where Weiland was the top individual supporter for years, the bequest will expand its efforts nationwide to get same-sex marriages legalized, fight workplace discrimination and secure the rights of gay parents.

Ultimately, Weiland hoped his acts would inspire more people to give, even though the visibility of these last donations would have made him uneasy, Bailey said.

"Each time he became more visible around his giving, I could tell he knew he was sacrificing something by doing that — the low profile that was so important to him," he said.

But, Bailey added, "In his absence, he's standing up one more time and showing people the way."