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## **Cecil Gilkerson, founder of City's Parks & Rec, passes away**

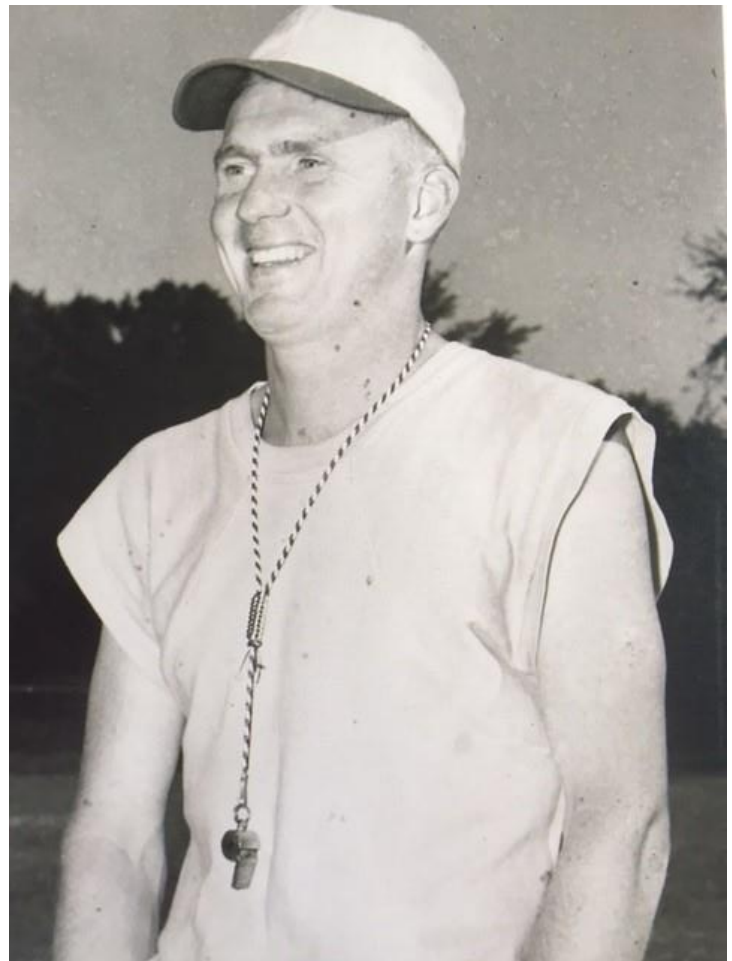
HARRISONBURG, Va. – It is with heavy heart that the City of Harrisonburg learned of the passing of Mr. Cecil Gilkerson – the father of Harrisonburg's Parks and Recreation system and an individual with a lifetime of service to supporting and improving our community.

Mr. Gilkerson, who passed away on Wednesday, Jan. 8, was 92 years old. He served as director of Parks and Recreation for some 35 years.

"Cecil was a true pioneer in the recreation profession," Harrisonburg Director of Parks and Recreation Luanne Santangelo said. "He created the solid foundation for our department that allowed us to continue to serve our community for 65 years. His presence will be missed but his spirit and his legacy will be with us always."

Mr. Gilkerson was Harrisonburg's very first director of Parks and Recreation, formally starting the department in 1954 with just himself, some part-time staff and 1.5-acres of park land. The City honored his service over the summer at the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Parks and Recreation, which thanks to Mr. Gilkerson's leadership has grown to more than 125 full- and part-time staff and some 650 acres.

His contributions to youth engagement helped make Harrisonburg the family-friendly city it is today, as many parents and grandparents across Harrisonburg can point back to a Parks and Recreation program that helped shape them in their youth into who they are today. There are still many who will say Cecil was as good as a father figure to them when they were growing up, and point to his athletic or playground programs as what kept them safe and healthy when they were kids with too much time on their hands.



*(Above) Cecil Gilkerson, who started the Harrisonburg Parks and Recreation Department in 1954.*

A mentor of many, Mr. Gilkerson was a major influence in the Harrisonburg community, from molding lives through providing recreation opportunities, being a mentor to those working in the recreation industry, or just being a compassionate friend. Cecil knew no stranger.

Mr. Gilkerson also was a founding member of the Virginia Recreation and Park Society, serving as the society's president. He also was the recipient of the society's Fellows Award in 1967. His efforts over the years not only made a lasting impact on Harrisonburg, but helped set a standard for what a Parks and Recreation Department should be for all of Virginia.



"The Parks and Recreation profession lost a true pioneer on Wednesday," said Jim Stutts, executive director of Virginia Recreation and Park Society and a long-time friend and colleague of Mr. Gilkerson. "In addition to his work in his beloved city, Cecil was a leader throughout Virginia and the country. With his leadership and influence, many localities in Virginia were able to establish their own park and recreation programs.

*(Above) Mr. Gilkerson (second from left) with past Harrisonburg Parks and Recreation directors and his daughter, Lynn (far right), who currently works for Parks and Recreation.*

"In addition, Cecil was part of a Governor's Commission that established a blueprint for outdoor recreation in Virginia. This 'blueprint', now referred to as The Virginia's Outdoor Plan, is still in use today, and is updated every five years."

The City of Harrisonburg extends its deepest condolences to the Gilkerson family, and would like to thank them for all they have done for our community. Service details honoring Mr. Gilkerson are to be determined.

**The City of Harrisonburg** is centrally located in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. It is home to approximately 54,000 people. More information about the City of Harrisonburg is available online at [www.HarrisonburgVA.gov](http://www.HarrisonburgVA.gov).



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