



James W. Apthorp

September 22, 1938 - November 19, 2024

Jim Apthorp, who often was identified as the late Governor Reubin Askew's "lightning rod, doorkeeper, and alter ego" when serving as the Governor's chief of staff, and who was instrumental in shaping policies that protected Florida's environment, strengthened government ethics, and advanced equal treatment for all people, died peacefully in Tallahassee on Tuesday, November 19, 2024. His beloved wife, Cheri Boyd Apthorp, was at his side, along with other members of the large family that he loved so deeply.

James William Apthorp, Jr., was born in Tallahassee on September 22, 1938. His father, James W. Apthorp, Sr., was a dairy farmer and later a route salesman for Eli Witt Tobacco & Candy Co.; his mother, Aline Lavern Smith Apthorp, ran a small nursery school from the house. Jim's earliest years were spent on his grandfather Apthorp's farm, on the eastern shores of Lake Ella. When Jim was two, the family relocated the farm to Old St. Augustine Road several miles out of town.

Jim and his younger brother, George, grew up exploring the nearby woods, picnicking with their parents at St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge, Torreya State Park, and Florida Caverns State Park, and fishing at Shell Point and Lake Talquin. Jim started camping at the age of six, sometimes alone but often with Boy Scout Troop 106, with his father as Scoutmaster. Jim later told a friend that camping gave him a sense of self-worth and self-reliance that

carried over into other parts of his life.

At Leon High School, he was student council vice president, Key Club president, and a delegate to Boys State. Classmate Gayle Nelson remembers that Jim “was a star.” The summer after graduation, he and two cousins enlisted in the Army, which sent him to Fort Jackson, in Columbia, South Carolina, for six months of basic training. After that, he returned to Tallahassee and enrolled as a government major at Florida State University. He served as Men’s Vice President and Student Body Attorney General, president of Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity and the Interfraternity Council, and a student senator. He also was inducted into Gold Key and Omicron Delta Kappa honorary societies before graduating in 1960.

But the most transformative experience of Jim’s college years came when he attended a student conference in Chicago. The organization’s national president was a brilliant Black man. It electrified Jim, who had never been in a classroom with African-Americans, and helped propel him into politics. “I just had to get involved,” he told a friend.

Jim started law school at the University of Florida but was called back into the Army during the 1961 Berlin Crisis. Following a year’s active duty at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas, he decided not to return to law school and went to work for the Florida Senate Sergeant-at-Arms instead. This brought him to the attention of Senate President John “Jack” Mathews of Jacksonville, who was planning a race for Governor and hired Jim as his chief travel aide. But Mathews came in fifth out of six candidates in the 1964 Democratic primary, and Jim once again needed a job.

He found it in the basement of the Old Capitol Building, clipping newspapers and emptying trash as a \$500-a-month assistant in the Florida Department of State. In less than three years, Jim would be named Deputy Secretary of

State, the second-in-command to Secretary Tom Adams.

As Deputy, Jim got to know Nathaniel “Nat” Reed, who became a nationally prominent environmental champion but at the time was a dollar-a-year counsel to Republican Governor Claude Kirk. In mid-1969, Reed asked if Jim, a lifelong Democrat, would allow Kirk to nominate him to be executive director of the Internal Improvement Trust Fund. The agency -- which managed all state-owned lands, including submerged property, and made recommendations about land sales and dredge-and-fill permitting -- reported to both the Governor and the Cabinet. But the relationship between Kirk and the six Democratic Cabinet members was so dysfunctional that the IITF had lost four executive directors in six months and the agency’s work was badly log-jammed.

Jim accepted the offer and soon proved masterful at winning Governor-Cabinet consensus. The IITF began requiring permits before companies could disturb environmentally sensitive lands. It implemented a law allowing the State to buy back privately held submerged lands to keep them safe from environmental damage; and, with assistance from Jim’s high school friend Duby Ausley, helped protect some of Florida’s most precious natural resources, including Biscayne National Monument. When Jim left the job less than two years later, the Associated Press reported: “Apthorp held the respect of conservationists and developers alike. . . .”

He was moving to a much bigger role: Governor’s chief of staff at just 32.

It would become one of the great partnerships in Florida history. During Askew’s eight years in office, he significantly expanded environmental protections; persuaded voters to pass the “Sunshine Amendment,” which established financial disclosure and other stringent ethics requirements for public officials; instituted Florida’s first corporate income tax; eliminated

political patronage in judicial appointments; supported school desegregation; and appointed the first African-American to the Florida Supreme Court.

For six of those years – longer than any other governor’s chief of staff has lasted in the job -- Jim was shaping Askew’s policies and strategy. He was self-effacing and always gave credit to the Governor or others, but his impact was widely recognized. “Much of what has come out of the Governor’s office . . . bears the stamp of the pragmatic chief aide,” the Tallahassee Democrat editorialized. “If you were talking with Jim, you were talking with Reubin,” recalls Robert M. Rhodes, who served as general counsel to House Speaker Richard “Dick” Pettigrew during the first two years of Askew’s governorship. “They saw life in the same way.”

Jim did not use that relationship to shut out other perspectives. Instead, “Jim wanted to make sure that the Governor was versed by people of different views –sometimes when he didn’t particularly want to hear them,” according to Donald M. Middlebrooks, Askew’s general counsel and now a federal judge. Askew himself said of Jim: “I thought that he was one of the most outstanding public servants and administrators that the state government had ever produced. He has a way of motivating people. . . . He has a way of making people feel good about themselves. And he’s always extending credit to others. . . . I always thought that he was the quintessential executive.”

But after six years, Jim wanted new challenges. He left government and moved to Miami to work for the Deltona Corporation, one of Florida’s biggest land developers, which was mired in regulatory battles over a Marco Island project that threatened to drive the company into bankruptcy.

“It was a tough time. That’s one of the reasons I came to Deltona,” Jim told Florida Trend Magazine. “My background was ready-made for working on problems.” He spent nearly three years negotiating settlements that saved the

company and won praise from environmental groups such as the Audubon Society. Afterward, he stayed on with Deltona but moved to Tampa to oversee construction of the extensive Tampa Palms development and remained with the project after it was bought by the Gulfstream organization. Jim later opened his own real estate consulting firm and then became chairman and eventually chairman emeritus of Atlantic Gulf Communities, finally retiring in 1999.

“Even in private business, I try to make this state the best place to live – one home at a time,” Jim said to Florida Trend after joining Gulfstream. Bob Rhodes, who moved from government into private law practice and once represented Atlantic Gulf for Jim, praises him for taking the long view as a developer: working to balance business and conservation goals so Florida truly can be a good place to live.

Jim’s volunteer activities were another form of public service. He sat on Florida’s 1977-78 Constitution Revision Commission; the House Speaker’s Water Task Force; the State Comprehensive Plan Committee; and the Florida Council of 100. Governors Chiles and Bush both named him to the Workforce Florida Board. In Miami, he was president of the Historical Association of South Florida. In Tampa, he chaired the Greater Tampa Chamber of Commerce and was a trustee for the University of South Florida Foundation. He chaired the FSU Foundation and was a co-founder and chair of the Collins Center for Public Policy (later, the LeRoy Collins Institute).

Jim’s lifetime enjoyment of the outdoors and his innate feeling of fellowship with all human beings made him a cherished companion and a remarkable public servant. “He always was focused on the environment and civil rights,” Jim’s daughter, East Aphthorp, remembers. “He believed that, if you get those right, the other pieces will come together.”

Faith, friends, and family also were central to Jim's life. He was baptized in Tallahassee's St. John's Episcopal Church and attended services there from childhood until he moved to Miami in the late 1970s. After returning to Tallahassee two decades later, he resumed active membership, serving as a delegate to the denominational convention and helping guide the church's support for the Tallahassee Civil Rights Memorial.

Friends recall Jim organizing birding expeditions; trips into the mountains of Tennessee, sometimes to hear Lessons and Carols at the University of the South; lunches at Shell Oyster Bar; and meals he prepared himself, often from recipes his mother had taught him. But what they remember most are his unflinching good spirits. "He had that good-natured personality as long as I knew him," according to Leon High classmate Jane Collins Aurell. "People liked him, they liked working with him, they liked being with him. He was always calm and nice. He helped other people, but he didn't seek power for himself."

Jim may not have sought power, but he knew how to captivate. Six years ago, he showed up at his daughter's house with a present for his grandson Anders, then aged nine and already passionate about the environment: a bookcase bigger than the boy was, something that had belonged to Jim's mother, and that Jim had filled entirely with books about Florida nature and history.

Jim left a pot of his mother's homemade fig jam on Cheri's doorstep the day after their first date 24 years ago. "I had never met anyone like this," she recalls. "He didn't buy me flowers, just left that little jar of homemade jam." They were married about four months later.

Cheri's five children took longer to convince. But not much longer. They watched Jim's devotion to their mother, marveled that there were "no harsh words ever," and soon realized that he was also their best cheerleader, a good

listener, and a wise counselor. This month, Cheri's son, Bob Boyd, told Florida Trend that he considers Jim his mentor.

The grandchildren took no convincing. Jim told each of the 13 that he or she was his favorite. More seriously, in the words of one grandson: "He taught me a lot about being a good person."

It was an experience East Apthorp has felt throughout her life: "My father's giant smile was an outward show of his genuine interest in others. He asked the best questions and found joy in listening to what others had to say." That quality may never have been more evident than during the months of his illness. Jim still "always had a smile on his face," according to one family member, and he unfailingly introduced his caregivers as "my friend." Of course, Jim thought he was the lucky one. Just days before his death, he reflected on his life while sitting with Cheri and an old friend. "I've had a wonderful life," he said. "There are three or four parts of my story, but some things are the same in each phase of my life: I've always been surrounded by wonderful people."

Jim was preceded in death by his parents and his stepfather, Louis Gordon Crooks, whom his mother married after his father's early death. He is survived by his wife of 23 years, Cheri Boyd Apthorp; a son, James Francis Apthorp; a daughter, Louise East Apthorp (Ken Malmberg); children by marriage Laura Pearce (Robby Cunningham), Bob Boyd (Cheryl), Kelly Kirby (Rip), Jill Hay (Williams) and Cindy Thomas (Dean Gargiulo); a brother, George East Apthorp (Sandy Cook Apthorp); grandchildren Anders Apthorp Lucius Malmberg, Meghan Pearce (Tim O'Connor), Molly McCabe (Colin), Will Boyd (Natalie), Katherine Kirby, Jean Kirby, Anna Harvell (Collin), Emmy Boyd, Will Hay, Anne Kirby, Jack Thomas, Zach Hay, and Ruth Hay; nephew John Apthorp (Ashley), niece Susan Apthorp Hemenway (Jim) and their children; numerous cousins; and countless friends and admirers.

A funeral service will take place at 11 a.m. Wednesday, November 27, at St.

John's Episcopal Church, 211 North Monroe Street, Tallahassee, Florida 32301. In lieu of flowers, the family requests that memorial contributions be made to St. John's Church, either at the address above or online at St. John's Episcopal Church (<https://www.saint-john.org/give/memorial-gifts/>).

Rocky Bevis and Kelly Barber of Bevis Funeral Home (850-385-2193 or www.bevisfh.com) are assisting the Apthorp family with their arrangements.

Previous Events

Funeral Service

NOV 27. 11:00 AM (ET)

St. John's Episcopal Church
211 North Monroe St.
Tallahassee, FL 32301

Tribute Wall



“ *Loving Lilies and Roses Bouquet was purchased for the family of James W. Apthorp.*



November 26, 2024 at 07:14 PM



“ *Beautiful in Blue was purchased for the family of James W. Apthorp.*



November 26, 2024 at 01:17 PM



“ *Hayward Cordy and Family purchased the Large Basket Garden for the family of James W. Apthorp.*



Hayward Cordy and Family - November 26, 2024 at 09:08 AM



“ *Hayward Cordy and Family planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of James W. Apthorp.*

Hayward Cordy and Family - November 26, 2024 at 09:08 AM