



Hon. William Dawson "Bill" Gunter, Jr.

July 16, 1934 - April 8, 2024

William Dawson "Bill" Gunter, Jr., age 89, died peacefully at his home in Tallahassee, FL, surrounded by family on April 8, 2024. He was part of a group of Florida public officials in the nineteen seventies and eighties, including Governors Reubin Askew, Lawton Chiles and Bob Graham, following the tradition of Governor LeRoy Collins in their commitment to the principles of good government and social justice. Gunter served in the Florida Senate, the U.S. Congress, and on the Florida Cabinet as Insurance Commissioner, State Treasurer and Fire Marshall for 12 years.

A fourth-generation Floridian, born July 16, 1934, Gunter grew up working on the family dairy farm near Live Oak in Suwanee County excelling in student politics, sports, and academics. His senior year in high school, he was a Page for U.S. Congressman Charles Bennett and in college, he was elected National President of the Future Farmers of America, traveling the country and Europe during his term, culminating in a meeting with President Eisenhower in the Oval Office.

Gunter attended the University of Florida and waited tables to help pay college expenses. He was Majority Whip of the student legislature, managing editor of The Florida Alligator, president of the Baptist Student Union, an

active member of Sigma Alpha Epsilon, and was selected for membership in Florida Blue Key and the UF Hall of Fame. He graduated in 1956 with high honors, the same year he was named as one of the Florida Jaycees “Five Outstanding Young Men.” After a tour in the U.S. Army, Gunter briefly taught at Edgewater High School in Orlando and in 1959 joined State Farm Insurance, becoming Regional Agency Manager in 1961.

Inspired by the courage of his role model Governor LeRoy Collins, Gunter ran for and was elected to the Florida Senate in 1966. He supported Governor Askew’s historic Government in the Sunshine reforms that enhanced public access to government meetings and records. As the Senator representing the Orlando area, he sponsored the Disney Bill in 1967 and was an early supporter of the establishment and growth of FTU, now the University of Central Florida. He worked to simplify the citizen initiative process in the Florida Constitution and advocated for education and prison reforms. In 1972 Gunter was elected to the U.S. Congress from Florida’s Fifth District. He served on the House Agriculture and Science and Astronautics Committees, and the Energy Subcommittee where he promoted solar and other sustainable energy sources.

In 1976 Gunter was elected State Treasurer, Insurance Commissioner and Fire Marshall. He pioneered insurance reforms including “excess profits” laws refunding over a hundred million dollars to consumers and significantly lowering rates. In 1981, he became President of the National Association of State Treasurers and in 1983, he was elected President of the National Association of Insurance Commissioners. Washington Monthly wrote that Gunter “heads one of the nation’s most aggressive and efficient insurance regulatory agencies.” In 1986, Gunter was re-elected with more than two million votes – then a record for any Florida candidate running for statewide

office. In 1988, Gunter was named the “most effective insurance commissioner in the U.S.” by the National Insurance Consumers Organization.

Gunter rarely traveled without his briefing book which he studied at every quiet moment. Governor Bob Graham noted he was “always prepared” on Cabinet issues. Gunter was a strong advocate for preservation of the Everglades, beaches, wetlands, and barrier islands. He was named Florida Audubon Society Conservationist of the Year for 1987. At his request, Gunter’s ashes will be scattered on the St. John’s River near his birthplace, the Suwannee River where he grew up, the Wekiva River where his family enjoyed canoeing and Alligator Point on the Gulf of Mexico where he and his wife, Kathy had a beach home.

Gunter insisted on diversity in his own staff and, as a Cabinet Member, initiated a reporting requirement on appointment of women to management positions in state agencies. As State Treasurer, he designed a plan to disinvest state funds from the apartheid regime in South Africa.

In 1989 Gunter joined what became Rogers Gunter Vaughn Insurance in Tallahassee as a partner, working with son Bart, and longtime friends, Sam Rogers, Sr., and Sam Rogers, Jr., serving intermittently as president, CEO and Chairman of the Board until his retirement in 2018. In 2003, he joined the Board of the Florida Association of Insurance Agents which he chaired in 2010. In 2013, Gunter was designated as a “Great Floridian” by the Governor and Florida Cabinet in recognition of his lifetime of public service to the people of his beloved “Sunshine State”.

Gunter loved to travel with his wife, Kathy and son Joel and other family members, including 12 trips to 14 countries in Africa, climbing the side of a Rwandan volcano in his 70's to visit the mountain gorillas. He was also first to volunteer to go down in a steel cage to see great white sharks off the coast of South Africa.

Gunter was known for devotion to his family, compassion for those in need, love of adventure and willingness to mentor the young. The grandson of a minister who served churches in north and central Florida, he served as a deacon and Sunday school teacher and was a faithful member of the Trinity United Methodist Church at the time of his passing.

Gunter was preceded in death by his first wife, Leslie Peaden Gunter and parents William Dawson Gunter, Sr. and Ruth Senterfitt Gunter. He is survived by his loving wife and best friend, Kathleen Boyd Atkins-Gunter, sons Bartlett David (Jennifer) Tallahassee, FL, Joel Stephen, Orlando, FL, daughters Rachel Gunter Shapard (Tommy), Jacksonville, FL, Rebecca Gunter Wood (Jonathan), Brunswick, GA, stepdaughter Melinda Baker Trotman (Lee), stepsons Christopher Lee Baker, and Michael Scott Baker, all of Tallahassee, FL. He is also survived by grandchildren Claudia Gunter-Leyh (Sean), Hannah Gunter, Dorey Gunter, Drew Shapard, Kate Shapard, Mac Shapard, Brennan Wood, Tucker Wood, Callie Wood, Kensie Wood, Kearce Baker, Madison Baker, Zachary Baker, Arden Baker and Julia Baker. Additionally, he is survived by sisters Marilyn Gunter Atkins (Richard) Winter Park, FL, and Harriett Gunter Summer (Charles deceased) Orlando, FL., former wife Teresa Gunter White (Tim), Tallahassee, FL, and many nephews, nieces, longtime friends, former staff members and associates.

The family would like to extend special appreciation to the following Hopewell team members for their loving care over the past few months: Paula Crosby, India Cobb, Doretha Harris, and Keiyona Jefferson.

A Celebration of Bill's Life will be held at Trinity United Methodist Church, Monday, April 29, 2024, at 10:00 AM. The family invites all guests to a reception in Moor Hall immediately following the service. A private burial service for family members will follow at Roselawn Cemetery.

In lieu of Flowers, the family suggests contributions may be given to Trinity United Methodist Church, 120 W. Park Avenue, Tallahassee, FL 32302 (<https://tumct.tpsdb.com/Give/tumct>; select One Time Gift and Gunter-Memorial Gift); Florida Historic Capitol Museum Foundation, 400 S. Monroe Street, Tallahassee, FL 32301: <https://bit.ly/donatetohistoriccapitol>; or the Bill Gunter FFA Scholars Fund, University of Florida: <https://www.uff.ufl.edu/giving-opportunities/022813-bill-gunter-ffa-scholars-fund/>

Rocky Bevis and Kelly Barber of Bevis Funeral Home in Tallahassee (<https://www.bevisfh.com>) are assisting the Gunter family with arrangements.

Cemetery Details

Roselawn Cemetery

815 West Piedmont Drive
Tallahassee, FL 32308

Previous Events

Memorial Service

APR 29. 10:00 AM (ET)

Trinity United Methodist Church
120 W Park Ave
Tallahassee, FL 32301
(850) 222-1120

Reception

APR 29. 11:00 AM (ET)

Moor Hall
120 West Park Avenue
Tallahassee, FL

Tribute Wall

RA

“ We send our love to all of you. We are sorry we could not be there, but you were in our prayers. With love,Ronnie and Beryl

Ronnie and Beryl Arbaugh - May 07, 2024 at 11:35 PM

RD

“ To family and friends, I am so very sorry for your loss. Bill was a great man but more importantly a great role model for all. To Joel and family, sending love to you all, as you are in my thoughts now and I know you'll have comfort of many who loved and admired your father

Robert Dodd - April 29, 2024 at 03:22 PM

KS

“ Karin, Ellen, Michelle, Kelley, Shannon purchased the Peaceful White Lilies Basket for the family of Hon. William Dawson "Bill" Gunter, Jr..



Karin, Ellen, Michelle, Kelley, Shannon - April 26, 2024 at 12:10 PM



“ Enchanted Cottage was purchased for the family of Hon. William Dawson "Bill" Gunter, Jr..



April 24, 2024 at 10:10 PM



“ *Emerald Garden Basket was purchased for the family of Hon. William Dawson "Bill" Gunter, Jr..*



April 21, 2024 at 04:13 PM



“ *Anne and I send our condolences to all of Bill's family. Special love sent to Hattie Summer.
Anne and Rob Mueller*

Anne & Rob Mueller - April 17, 2024 at 09:06 AM



“ *Arrive in Style was purchased for the family of Hon. William Dawson "Bill" Gunter, Jr..*



April 16, 2024 at 04:29 PM



“ *From Candy and Brian planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of Hon. William Dawson "Bill" Gunter, Jr..*

From Candy and Brian - April 16, 2024 at 04:29 PM



“ *With deepest sympathy to Joel and the Gunter family. Frank Cellon, Melrose,FL.*

Frank Cellon - April 12, 2024 at 01:11 PM

LF

“ Lowcountry Rural Housing Task Force purchased the Country Basket Blooms for the family of Hon. William Dawson "Bill" Gunter, Jr..



Lowcountry Rural Housing Task Force - April 11, 2024 at 03:07 PM

DS

“ I am so sorry for your loss. Bill was a good man. Dianne Jennings Speicher

Dianne Speicher - April 10, 2024 at 07:23 PM



“ Dreams From the Heart Bouquet was purchased for the family of Hon. William Dawson "Bill" Gunter, Jr..



April 10, 2024 at 04:26 PM

DD

“ So very sorry for your lose Joel and family ❤️ Always remember your Dad is in your heart forever ❤️

Denise DeBlois - April 10, 2024 at 12:15 PM