

Gary Burrell, Who Helped People Find Their Way (With GPS), Dies at 81

By Sam Roberts

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Gary Burrell, who with a fellow engineer founded Garmin, the navigational device company whose products can direct pilots in fog, prevent hikers from getting lost and help insomniacs track their sleep, died on June 12 at his home in Spring Hill, Kan. He was 81.

His death was announced by the company, which is based in Olathe, Kan. The cause was complications of Parkinson’s disease.

Mr. Burrell (pronounced burr-ELL) was vice president of engineering for King Radio, an avionics company that made navigational devices, when he recruited Dr. Min H. Kao from Magnavox, another defense contractor. Dr. Kao had been instrumental in developing a GPS receiver for aircraft.

At the time, the government was opening up its Global Positioning System for civilian use, and the two men saw possibilities.

In 1989, they pooled their savings and persuaded Dr. Kao’s Taiwanese relatives to invest seed money. With \$4 million and an office with two folding chairs, they started what would become the world’s largest maker of consumer navigation devices.

Garmin — a coupling of the partners’ first names — now has 13,000 employees at 60 sites around the world. Last year it reported revenue of more than \$3.3 billion from selling GPS devices to automotive, aviation, fitness, marine and outdoor recreation customers.

Even with the advent of wireless communications and smartphones, Garmin remained competitive by relying on technological advances, creative products and satellite links, which can widely cover areas that Wi-Fi can’t reach.

Garmin introduced the GPS 100 Personal Navigator, automatic pilot systems, sonar for anglers and a new hand-held navigator with two-way messaging and tracking. The company expanded into cameras and wearable technology; one device can be programmed to let women monitor their menstrual cycle.

For a man whose career depended on promoting the exact opposite of the exasperated entreaty “Get lost,” Mr. Burrell rarely invited the media to a news conference or sat still for interviews.

Inside the company, he practiced what he called “servant leadership.” As Cliff Pemble, Garmin’s president and chief executive and one of Mr. Burrell’s first employees, explained, “Whether it was about creating the best product or his behavior as a leader, Gary always considered the impact to others before himself.”

Gary Leon Burrell was born on Aug. 24, 1937, in Wichita, Kan., to Leslie and Ruth Burrell. His father was a lamp maker.

According to the Indian Creek Community Church in Olathe, which Mr. Burrell supported, “When Gary was 9 years old, he gave his life to Christ at a Christian camp in the middle of a severe thunderstorm. For the rest of his life, his faith would play a central role in everything he did.”

He earned a bachelor’s degree in electrical engineering from Wichita State University. While working for United Aircraft in Hartford, he went on to acquire a master’s from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, more than 100 miles to the northwest, in upstate New York.

He later worked at Lawrence Electronics, King and finally Allied Signal, into which King had been absorbed.

Dr. Kao recalled that over dinner at a Red Lobster in 1989, he asked Mr. Burrell if he had ever thought of starting his own business.

“He was probably half-joking,” Dr. Kao told Forbes magazine in 2003, “but he then said that he would only start a company with me.”

They ran Garmin jointly as chief executives and took the company public in 2000. Mr. Burrell retired in 2002. He remained as co-chairman with Dr. Kao until 2004, when he was named chairman emeritus.

Forbes estimated in 2015 that Mr. Burrell had a 14 percent stake in Garmin and was worth \$1.8 billion at the company’s peak value.

He is survived by his wife, Judith (Overholt) Burrell; their three sons, Randy, Jon and Mike; and eight grandchildren.