Robert Beck, 1921-2012

By Ronnie Reese
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Robert Beck, founder of Beck's Bookstore, had two great loves in life other than his family, according to his daughter.

"His passions were the bookstore and the Cubs," Linda Beck-Olson said. "That was it."

Mr. Beck started Beck's in 1957, with wooden crates for bookshelves and a cigar box cash register in a storefront at 22 E. Chicago Ave. in Chicago. That store grew into a successful bricks-and-mortar and e-commerce retail chain, which has served high schools and colleges in Chicago and the surrounding suburbs for 55 years.

He was featured prominently in the HBO documentary "Wait 'Til Next Year: The Saga of the Chicago Cubs," which explored the history of the team and their fans' obsession with Major League Baseball's "lovable losers."

As the 2006 Opening Day approached in the film, Mr. Beck reminisced on his life as a Cubs fan, from his first game in 1929 to having a corner seat and his own television at Bernie's Tap and Grill on Clark Street in his later years when he was gradually losing his eyesight.

The longtime season ticket holder made his living at Beck's Bookstore, but "my second office was Wrigley Field," he said.

Mr. Beck, 91, of Chicago's Lakeview community and formerly of Homewood, died of heart failure Thursday, Sept. 13, in Northwestern Memorial Hospital, his daughter said.

He loved the Cubs "the way a patient parent loves their wayward child," said friend Al Gini, professor of business ethics at the Loyola University Chicago Quinlan School of Business.

"Even though they weren't successful, even though they weren't good, even though they always disappointed him, he loved them," Gini said.

Mr. Beck was born on the North Side in the shadows of Wrigley Field. He graduated from Waller High School (now Lincoln Park High School) before joining the Coast Guard, with which he served in World War II.

Returning to Chicago, he took a job in the stockroom of Faulkner's Educational Books and worked his way up to manager before the desire to expand led him to start his own business.
As a businessman, "his goal was getting the kids the best deal he could possibly get for them, and great customer service," his daughter said.

The first Beck's Bookstore provided textbooks and other materials to students and teachers at Loyola University's Water Tower campus in Chicago. A location for Northeastern Illinois University came next, then Loyola's Lake Shore campus, then locations inside Harold Washington College and Truman College when both schools first opened their doors.

Mr. Beck was loyal to his employees, hiring part-time workers who stayed employed for decades. He also possessed a generous nature in serving professors and administrators at the schools he partnered with.

Gini was fresh out of graduate school and in his first job at Loyola when the two met in the 1960s. He was unable to afford teaching materials, so Mr. Beck gave him books for free and began taking the young professor to lunch regularly.

"He made a life for himself and a life for a lot of people for over 35 years," Gini said.

Beck's Bookstore provided a valuable service for thousands of students over the years, and Mr. Beck "always prided himself on the fact that he treated the students and the faculty fairly, gave better prices than a lot of college bookstores do, and paid more for the used books," said his son, Phil.

Mr. Beck became a Cubs season ticket holder in the 1960s and saw more than 90 games a year, attending every Cubs home game and away games against the Cardinals in St. Louis, his son said.

He witnessed a number of memorable — though often heartbreaking — baseball moments, including catcher Gabby Hartnett's walk-off "Homer in the Gloamin'" in 1938 and St. Louis Cardinal great Stan Musial's 3,000th career hit, both at Wrigley Field. He was in San Diego in 1984 when the Cubs lost the National League Championship Series to the Padres. And he was at Wrigley Field for Games 6 and 7 of the 2003 NLCS, when the Cubs again failed to make their first World Series appearance since 1945.

Just before the HBO film's conclusion, Mr. Beck was asked about the Cubs' future. "You mean wait till next year?" he said. "I don't have that many years to wait!"

Additional survivors include his wife of 65 years, Nadine; five grandchildren; and two great-grandchildren. A grandson, Arthur "Artie" Beck-Olson, preceded him in death.

A celebration of Mr. Beck's life will be held at 7 p.m. Saturday at Bernie's Tap and Grill, 3664 N. Clark St., Chicago.