

MICHAEL J. BIRCK 1938-2015

Retired CEO, chairman of Naperville's Tellabs

Electrical engineer was 1 of technology firm's 6 co-founders

**BY MARY ELLEN
PODMOLIK**
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Tellabs was just getting its footing when the early 1980s recession hit.

Michael J. Birck, one of Tellabs' six co-founders and its CEO, went to his executive team and asked them to forgo the small bonuses they were promised. Instead, he distributed the money to other employees.

"He first and foremost looked out for his people," said Chris Cooney, another co-founder. "He was a superb engineer and manager. He was a very honorable guy. There were no short-cuts. He took on the difficult programs and was a solid citizen."

Birck, 77, died Monday.

He retired as Tellabs' chairman in 2013 after disclosing in August 2012 that he was being treated for an uncommon form of bone marrow cancer and would not run for re-election to its board. Birck had retired from his role as CEO in 2004, at age 65.

A varsity baseball player at Purdue who graduated with a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering in 1960, Birck founded Tellabs with five others during a brainstorming session at his kitchen table in 1975. They didn't take salaries, and their wives cleaned the offices. The company began making echo suppressors designed to improve telephone reception, and that led to the company developing an echo canceller in 1981.

"He wasn't home a whole lot during those first few



FAMILY PHOTO

Tellabs co-founder Michael J. Birck "just loved the technology," his son said.

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years," recalled his son Christopher. "Those guys just worked around the clock to get the company up and running."

With competition coming from Lucent Technologies and Ericsson AB and concerns about its slowing growth, Tellabs sought to grow through acquisition, with the goal of reaching \$2 billion in sales by 2000. It surpassed that by about \$1 billion, and in 2001 it had 8,900 employees before the dot-com crash caused substantial losses at the company and those like it.

"He just loved the technology," Christopher Birck said. "That's what really kept him interested. He enjoyed the technology more than he loved running the company."

In 2013, Naperville-based Tellabs agreed to be acquired by Marlin Equity Partners for \$891 million.

Cooney said Birck will be remembered for his candor and for leading by example, working long hours. "If Mike had a failure, it was that he believed everything someone told him until he was told differently," he said. "He could be bamboozled from time to time in terms of someone's overall worth to the company."

At home, Christopher Birck said, his father was a family man who enjoyed playing golf and watching baseball games, both the Chicago Cubs and those of his grandchildren. He was an avid and excited Cubs fan this season.

He was a member of Purdue's board of trustees for 14 years until he stepped down in 2013. His philanthropic efforts included gifts of more than \$30 million to the university's nanotechnology center and its golf complex.

In addition to son Christopher, he is survived by his wife, Katherine Birck, nee Royer; son Kevin, daughter Joni Stevenson; siblings Barbara Roehm, Patrick, Jon, and Vicki McDevitt; and seven grandchildren.

Visitation is scheduled for 3 to 9 p.m. Friday at Sullivan Funeral Home, 60 S. Grant St., Hinsdale. Funeral Mass will be celebrated at 10 a.m. Saturday at St. Isaac Jogues Church, 306 W. Fourth St., Hinsdale.

mepodmolik@tribpub.com
Twitter @mepodmolik