



Max De Pree

October 28, 1924 - August 8, 2017

A corporate and civic leader, Max De Pree published eloquent and moving analyses of the qualities of leadership that carried his influence far beyond the company he led and the corporate world in which that company distinguished itself. As chief executive officer of Herman Miller, Inc., he helped keep the Zeeland, Michigan-based manufacturer of office furniture in the vanguard of innovative, enlightened, and compassionate corporations. Under his direction, the company nearly tripled its sales and was frequently cited as "most admired" by Fortune magazine. Herman Miller also regularly appeared in lists of the "best companies to work for" in the U.S., partly because of De Pree's advocacy for innovative employee programs, such as a "Silver Parachute" (a program designed to protect all employees in the event of a hostile takeover), profit sharing, and employee stock ownership. De Pree's books and lectures brought worldwide attention to his original and articulate explorations of business, civic, and personal leadership. De Pree's first book, *Leadership Is An Art*, received almost unprecedented critical acclaim from people as diverse as management philosopher Peter Drucker, President Bill Clinton, and businessman Sam Walton. Praised for its humanitarian and spiritual insights, the book was described by the Washington Post as "small and soulful enough to be carried around like a prayer book--and in some respects, it is." Among De Pree's original insights, couched in eloquent language: "The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you." He advocated for "inclusive capitalism," based on a "concept of persons" rooted

in his Christian faith. In 1992, De Pree published a second book on leadership, *Leadership Jazz*, which took its title from De Pree's observation that "jazz, like leadership, combines the unpredictability of the future with the gifts of individuals." De Pree was also author of three other books, *Dear Zoe*, *Leading Without Power*, and *Called to Serve*. De Pree's books have sold more than 1 million copies and have been translated into more than a dozen languages. Born in Zeeland, Michigan, in 1924, Max De Pree graduated from Zeeland High School and attended Wheaton College before joining the US Army in 1943. His World War II military service consisted of a year and a half with the Third Army in the European Theater and study at the University of Pittsburgh, Haverford College, and the Sorbonne. Upon discharge, De Pree entered Hope College in Holland, Michigan, where he graduated. In 1947 he joined The Herman Miller Furniture Company, a small, family-owned business bought and re-named by his father in 1923. Early in his career, De Pree developed an interest in architecture, working with Charles Eames on the design for a house in 1954 and with George Nelson in 1958 on the company's headquarters. After serving in various roles in operations, sales, and marketing, he moved to Europe to manage the company's European and international operations in 1968 and to direct the company's building of facilities in Bath and Chippenham, England. Subsequently, De Pree led Herman Miller, Inc., to work closely with prominent architects to build widely acclaimed corporate facilities. In 1981, the American Institute of Architects honored the company with its AIA Gold Medal for "dedication to design excellence." In 1991, the Los Angeles chapter of the American Institute of Architects gave De Pree its Presidential Commemorative Award, and he was named an honorary member of the Michigan chapter of the AIA. In 1971, De Pree was elected chairman of the board at Herman Miller. Under his leadership, the Board began to include people from many disciplines and became a truly diverse and professional group. In 1980, De Pree became chief executive officer and advocated participation and "inclusiveness" at Herman Miller, two qualities for which the company was widely admired. De

Pree held seven honorary degrees and served on the boards of Hope College and Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. After 40 years on the Fuller board, the school established the Max De Pree Center for Leadership in 1997 in his honor. In 1992, he was elected to Fortune magazine's National Business Hall of Fame. He also served on the Peter Drucker Foundation Advisory Board. Once when a financial analyst asked him what problems faced Herman Miller and its leaders, De Pree replied, "the interception of entropy." He saw corporate deterioration as a constant threat, signaled by "a dark tension among key people," "manuals," "leaders who rely on structure instead of people," "a loss of grace and style and civility," and "a loss of respect for the English language." In his talks to groups from the University of London Business School to the American Institute of Architects to students at Aquinas College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, De Pree stressed the importance of organizational history, innovation, the need for leaders to be "vulnerable" to the talents of others, and the "authenticity of individuals." He also became interested in mentoring, wrote about the subject, and mentored business, church, and non-profit leaders. He wrote, "I believe this give-and-take relationship is the most effective way to guide people with leadership gifts toward their potential," and "Try to remember mentoring is a process of becoming, not an unimpeded march to perfection." He is survived by his wife, Esther, his indispensable partner. His sons, Charles and Kris, his daughters, Jody and Nancy, their spouses, 23 grandchildren, and 13 great-grandchildren also survive him. A service to honor the faith and life of Max De Pree will be held at 11:00 am, Saturday, August 12, 2017, in the Sanctuary of Christ Memorial Church, 595 Graafschap Road, Holland MI 49423. Visitation will be Thursday 5-8 pm, and Friday 3-6 pm, at Third Reformed Church of Holland, 111 W. 13th Street, Holland 49423. Private interment will be in Zeeland Cemetery. Memorial contributions may be made to either:
Third Reformed Church-Affordable Housing Fund, 111 W. 13th Street, Holland MI 49423

Fuller Theological Seminary-Student Scholarship Fund, 135 N. Oakland Ave., Pasadena, CA 91182. Arrangements by Langeland-Sterenberg Funeral Homes.

Tribute Wall



“ *Max De Pree*

August 31, 2022 at 01:26 PM



“ *"I had the privilege of working for Max back in the mid-1970s at Herman Miller. Those three years working with him forever shaped my life both professionally and personally. I am forever grateful to him for his kind spirit, his vision about being a leader, and his good sense of humor."*

Larry Smith - August 17, 2017 at 12:00 AM



“ *"May the arms of God encircle the family. Heaven is a better place due to the welcoming of you, Cousin Max."*

Jane Meengs Feit - August 13, 2017 at 12:00 AM



“ *"Our prayers are with the family. Max was a wonderful person and I feel fortunate to have known him. He will be greatly missed."*

Prescott Slee - August 12, 2017 at 12:00 AM



“ *"It was a pleasure to know Max and work at Herman Miller for over 25 years. He impacted many lives including mine. I just finished presenting a talk on Leadership to a group of teens at summer camp where I used Leadership As An Art as the background for the discussion. His life impacted so many and for that he will be missed."*

Carol Austin - August 12, 2017 at 12:00 AM

KP

“ *“He made the world a better place and inspired all of us that knew him.”* ”

Kris Pathuis - August 12, 2017 at 12:00 AM

DS

“ *“Prayers for you, Esther”* ”

Dolly Snoeyink - August 12, 2017 at 12:00 AM

TH

“ *“Rest In Peace”* ”

Terry Harrison - August 11, 2017 at 12:00 AM

PH

“ *“As former faculty at Fuller School of Psychology, I saw up close this phenomenal servant of Jesus Christ. Enjoy heaven!”* ”

Phyllis Hart - August 11, 2017 at 12:00 AM

RN

“ *“Max De Pree* ”

Roger Nauta - August 11, 2017 at 12:00 AM

RM

“ *“Thinking of all of you at this difficult time. It was a pleasure to work for Max!! Esther your especially in my prayers!!”* ”

Robin Miedema - August 11, 2017 at 12:00 AM

KW

“A good man just like his father.”

Kirk Way - August 11, 2017 at 12:00 AM

MF

“I never met Max in person. I only knew him through his books. His studies in compassionate leadership have been a blessing to me and to the students I have had the honour of mentoring. Thank you, Max! On behalf of the McMaster University and Mohawk College CRC Campus Ministry I would like to offer the De Pree family our sincere condolences. God bless you all.”

Michael Fallon - August 11, 2017 at 12:00 AM