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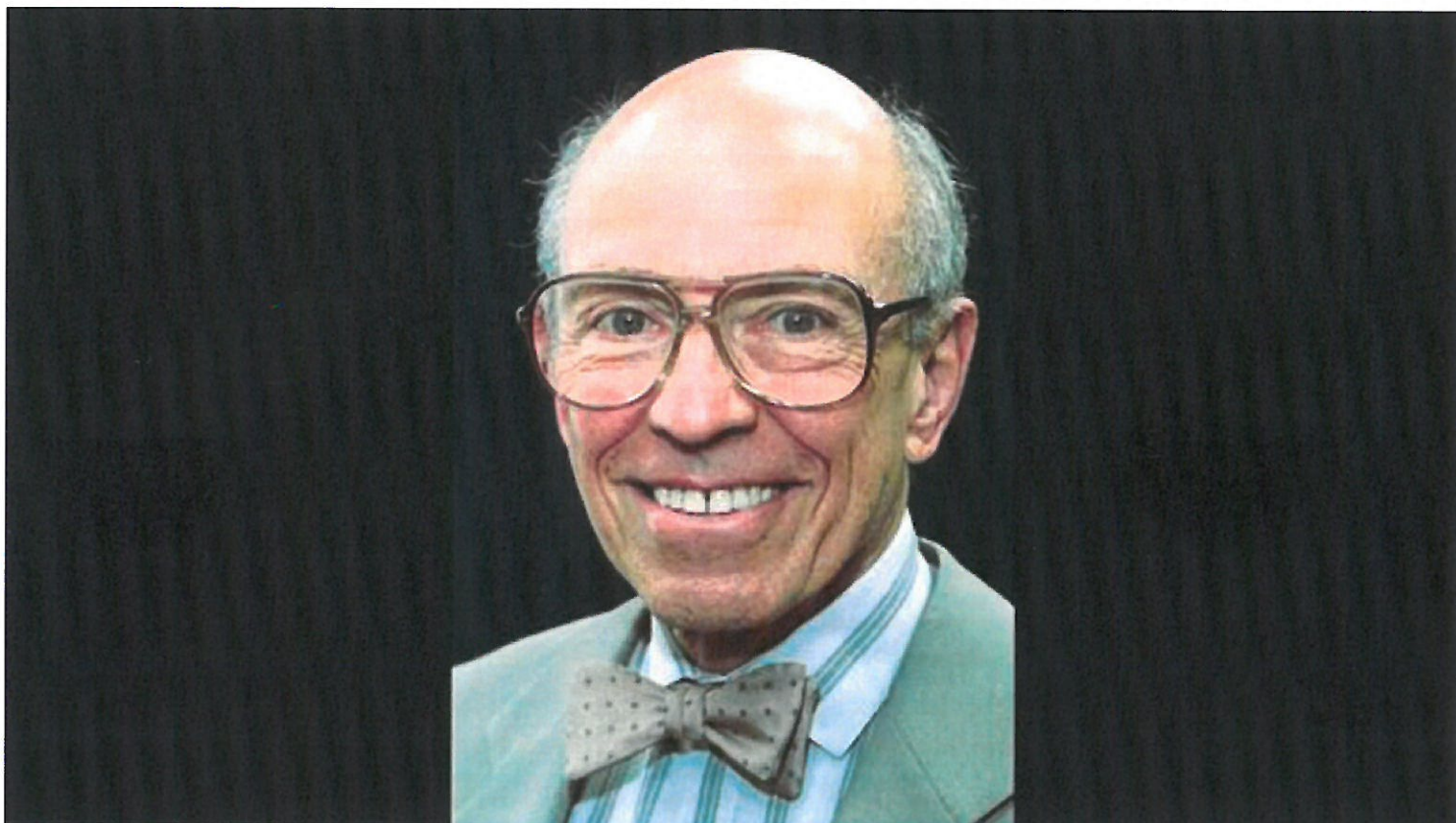
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LOCAL OBITUARIES

Dr. Wil Blechman, 'a sainted figure in early childhood development,' dies in Miami at 89

BY HOWARD COHEN

UPDATED SEPTEMBER 15, 2021 6:05 PM



Dr. Wil Blechman in a Nov. 7, 1995 file photo from Tallahassee, Florida, after Gov. Lawton Chiles announced his appointment as Florida's new health officer. HUGH SCOGGINS AP



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Dr. Wil Blechman — one of Florida's most influential advocates for early childhood learning — died Wednesday morning at his Miami-Dade home at age 89 after battling cancer, his wife Rachel Blechman said.

"Wil was one of my earliest and wisest advisers — now more than three decades ago — on the imperative of investing in early learning and school readiness," said David

Lawrence Jr., [chair of the Children's Movement of Florida](#). "I could not have a better teacher and ally and friend. He brought a soul of great decency to everything."

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AD



Blechman, appointed Florida State Health Officer by Gov. Lawton Chiles in 1995, was born in May 1932 to Florence and Charles Blechman in Washington, D.C. He graduated from Yale University in 1953 and the Medical College of Virginia in 1957.

In 1959, he started a fellowship in rheumatology at Johns Hopkins University. Soon after, he moved to South Florida and began his medical practice with the formation of his medical group in North Miami Beach in 1961.



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For the next 30 years, he developed a reputation as a devoted internist and rheumatologist. But in a surprise mid-life twist, Blechman found his greatest renown for his work on behalf of the world's children.

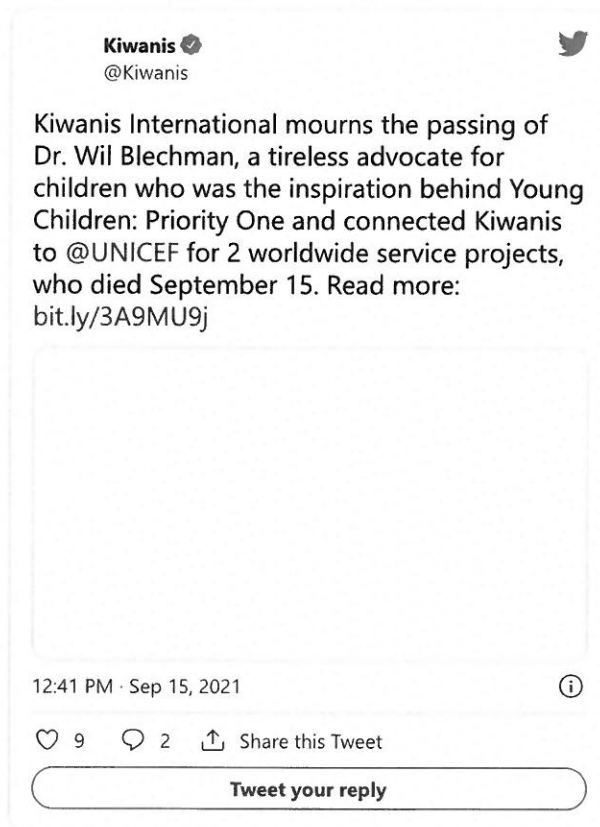
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OBITUARIES

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SEPTEMBER 02, 2021 11:56 AM

After [joining the Kiwanis Club](#) of North East Miami-Dade in 1962, he became club president, then Florida Kiwanis governor, an international trustee and president of Kiwanis International in 1990-91. He "embodied the Kiwanis motto of serving the children of the world," the group wrote in tribute after he died on Sept. 15.



INVESTING IN CHILDREN

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Blechman partnered Kiwanis with UNICEF to initiate a program to understand the role iodized salt plays in healthy brain development and worked to help eliminate iodine deficiency disorder, Rachel Blechman said.

Dr. Wil, as he was fondly called by patients and colleagues, was also involved in the Kiwanis' work to eliminate maternal neonatal tetanus, a deadly disease that kills nearly 34,000 babies annually.

"He worked with Lawton Chiles on the vaccination rate for young children and raised the vaccination rate well above what it had been before to an acceptable rate. When you say he impacted children he impacted *thousands* of children worldwide in so many ways," said his wife.

"He was just a truly amazing man. You talk about how one person can change the world, and this is someone who has dedicated the latter part of his life to children and the importance of brain development. From a moral standpoint and an economic standpoint he understood it all," said James Haj, president and CEO of The Children's Trust.

“If we invest early on in children, not only financially but with our hearts and give them all the resources available, this community and this world would be a much better place,” Haj said. “And I think Wil handily changed the trajectory for the youth of this community.”

The Children’s Trust lost one of its most passionate and committed supporters today with the passing of Dr. Wil Blechman. This unassuming man with his trademark bowtie devoted his life to helping children and families in Miami-Dade and he will be dearly missed. pic.twitter.com/AWRAj2Qh7V

— childrenstrust (@childrenstrust) September 15, 2021

ADVOCACY AND ACHIEVEMENTS



Miami's Dr. Wil Blechman speaking to a group of Kiwanis members at a district conference in 2013 on the importance of early childhood development.
COURTESY JACK LEVINE

Jack Levine, a child and family advocate for 43 years and founder of the [4Generations Institute](#) in Tallahassee, celebrated Blechman's "truly infectious spirit for children. The man created an aura of concern and conscientious advocacy that was so effective in moving people in the direction of worthy causes," he said.

Blechman's various faculty positions included research professor of public health at the University of South Florida, associate professor of medicine at Nova Southeastern University School of Osteopathic Medicine and clinical professor emeritus status at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine.

Blechman also served as a senior consultant to the Department of Health and Children and Families, as a vice chair of the Children's Forum and as chair of the Health Committee of the United Way Center for Excellence.

"As we look through the roster of his honors and his involvements as a volunteer, the hours and brilliance he brought to the world of child advocacy are truly immeasurable," Levine said. "What the man created was a conscience for doing the right thing as early as possible in the lives of our youngest and he truly has had a generational impact."

FROM RHEUMATOLOGY TO CHILDREN'S HEALTH

The intriguing shift in Blechman's work is remarkable when one considers that his medical training and his clinical practice of 30 years had little, if any, relation to pediatrics or early childhood disease.

"Rheumatology, the treatment of what we usually consider ailments of the old — arthritis, rheumatic inflammation and the 'aches and pains' — are almost always associated with advanced aging," Levine noted.

In a letter Levine drafted to his advocacy group and shared with the Miami Herald, he recalled a story Blechman had told him about why early childhood mattered so much to him.

During an office visit at his North Miami Beach rheumatology practice one of Blechman's patients answered the simple pleasantries — "So, how are the grandchildren doing?" — with a sad, "To tell you the truth, Doc ... not so good."

Blechman learned that his patient's 4-year-old grandson had exhibited learning problems.

The small talk during the exam turned into a major life plan for the doctor.



In this Sept. 6, 2001 file photo, Dr. Wil Blechman, a Kiwanis president, gives then-Fulford Elementary second-grade student Wilson Milen school supplies donated by the Kiwanis as classmate Lames Voicr waits his turn in the school library. Charles Trainor Jr. *MIAMI HERALD FILE*



Blechman's Cornell-educated wife, Rachel Simonhoff Blechman, now a retired attorney from Miami's Holland & Knight, had a considerable background in the academic study of children. She proved a fount of information. The couple had married and blended their families in 1985 — two years after Blechman's wife Sidell Cohen died.

With her support, Blechman announced his retirement. He closed his rheumatology practice to begin the final three-decade-long chapter in his life.

The fruitful period would see an indefatigable Blechman elevated as a “sainted figure in early childhood development,” as Lawrence, a former Miami Herald publisher, described him.

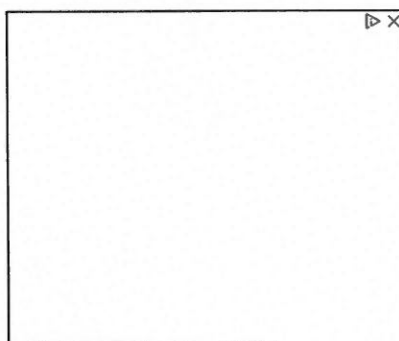
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SEPTEMBER 27, 2020 6:00 AM

Blechman, a [Marquis Who’s Who Humanitarian Award inductee](#) for 2020 and Lawton Chiles Foundation board member, was fueled by one foundational question, Levine wrote:



“Do young children deserve life experiences which promote their proper development — both physically and emotionally —.and if so, what can a middle-aged physician do to make a difference for a new generation of children in need?”

What this middle-aged physician with a mission did was help to develop and introduce a program called “Young Children: Priority One” to Kiwanis’ worldwide clubs. The program focuses on the prenatal period to age 5.

In March 2020, the Blechmans established the Wil and Rachel Blechman Fund via the Florida Kiwanis Foundation.

“We can think of no better way to honor the longtime work of Dr. Wil and Rachel than establishing the [Wil and Rachel Blechman Fund](#),” Florida Kiwanis Foundation president Jim Wylie had said in a news release. “Dr. Wil’s drive to emphasize early childhood has positively impacted children around the world. The Blechman legacy will be felt for generations to come.”

As recently as December, even as he fought cancer, Blechman was still advocating and speaking out on behalf of children.

Reacting to a Dec. 14 Miami Herald front-page story, "[County jails get big share of the property taxes](#)," Blechman wrote a letter to the editor urging officials to rethink how a portion of tax dollars ought to be utilized.

"For a change, we should pay attention to years of research that show it is possible to reduce criminal behavior by focusing more resources on enhancing young children's capabilities. Economists say the return on investment of public dollars in early childhood is between seven and 13% higher than most other investments," Blechman wrote.

"He was a wonderful husband, father and grandfather and that is certainly a part of who he is — and a dear friend to many people," his wife Rachel said. "Besides being a great doctor and a humanitarian and a volunteer, his personal life was equally wonderful."



In this Sept. 19, 2007 file photo, North Miami Police Chief Linda Loizzo gets a hug from Dr. Wil Blechman after she announced her retirement from the department after 33 years. CHARLOTTE SOUTHERN SPECIAL TO THE MIAMI HERALD

SURVIVORS

In addition to his wife Rachel, Blechman’s survivors include his children Michele Platt, Michael Blechman, Ivy Blechman, Diana Greenwell; his grandchildren Zac, Max, Jordan, Jacob and Eli, “and his aging rescue dog Mabel,” his family said.

A celebration of life and services will be held at a later date. His family welcomes contributions to the Wil and Rachel Fund for Young Children at the [Florida Kiwanis Foundation](#).

This story was originally published September 15, 2021 5:00 PM.

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SEPTEMBER 11, 2021 4:50 PM



Miami’s Dr. Wil Blechman speaking to a group of Kiwanis members at a district conference in 2013 on the importance of early childhood development. *COURTESY JACK LEVINE*



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Miami Herald Real Time/Breaking News reporter Howard Cohen, a 2017 Media Excellence Awards winner, has covered pop music, theater, health and fitness, obituaries, municipal government and general assignment. He started his career in the Features department at the Miami Herald in 1991.

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