KENNETH H. OLSEN
1926–2011

Elected 1977

“For leadership in the design and manufacturing of computers.”

BY ROBERT R. EVERETT

KENNETH H. OLSEN, one of the great pioneers in the development of digital computers and the computer industry, founder and former CEO of the Digital Computer Corporation, died on February 6, 2011, at the age of 84.

Ken was born in Bridgeport, Connecticut, in 1926 and raised in Stratford, Connecticut, where he showed an early interest in electronic devices, including repair of radio sets. Following service as an electronic technician in the US Navy during World War II, he entered the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), where he earned a BS (1950) and an MS (1952) in electrical engineering.

He joined the MIT Lincoln Laboratory where he worked on the development of computers for the SAGE Air Defense System. He contributed to the development of Jay Forrester’s Magnetic Core Memory and built his first computer, the MTC, designed for testing the first core memories as well as many other SAGE components. He spent time as a representative of Lincoln at the IBM Corporation, which was building the SAGE computers. While at IBM, he saw an opportunity to start a company to design and market computers that were smaller and less expensive than the large mainframes then being produced by IBM.
In 1957, Ken left Lincoln to form, with Harlan Anderson, the Digital Equipment Corporation (DEC) where Ken served as CEO for 35 years until his retirement in 1992. DEC became a great success under his vision and leadership. *FORTUNE* Magazine named him “America’s Most Successful Entrepreneur.” At its peak, DEC was the second largest computer company in the world.

Ken and DEC created the minicomputer industry by developing small, inexpensive, but powerful computers that found wide use in almost unlimited applications throughout commerce and industry, including manufacturing, control, and design. They were widely used as components in other makers’ devices. Ken and his company pioneered in other aspects of the development of computing, including interactive computing, operating systems, networking, application software, manufacturing, and business processes. Ken set the culture of his company, insisting always on quality, customer focus, employee empowerment, and, above all, honesty and integrity.

Ken received many honors, including the National Medal of Technology, and was named to the Inventors Hall of Fame. He served as chair of the Computer Science and Engineering Board of the National Research Council and as a member of the President’s Science Advisory Committee, the MIT Corporation, and the board of trustees of Gordon College.

Ken was an active member of the Park Street Church in Boston. He had a strong commitment to his faith that meshed with his values, business ethics, and scientific inquiry. In his quiet way he was an active philanthropist and generous contributor to worthy causes. Among his many gifts is the Ken Olsen Science Center at Gordon College.

Ken’s wife of 59 years, Eeva-Liisa Aulikki Olsen, died in March 2009.