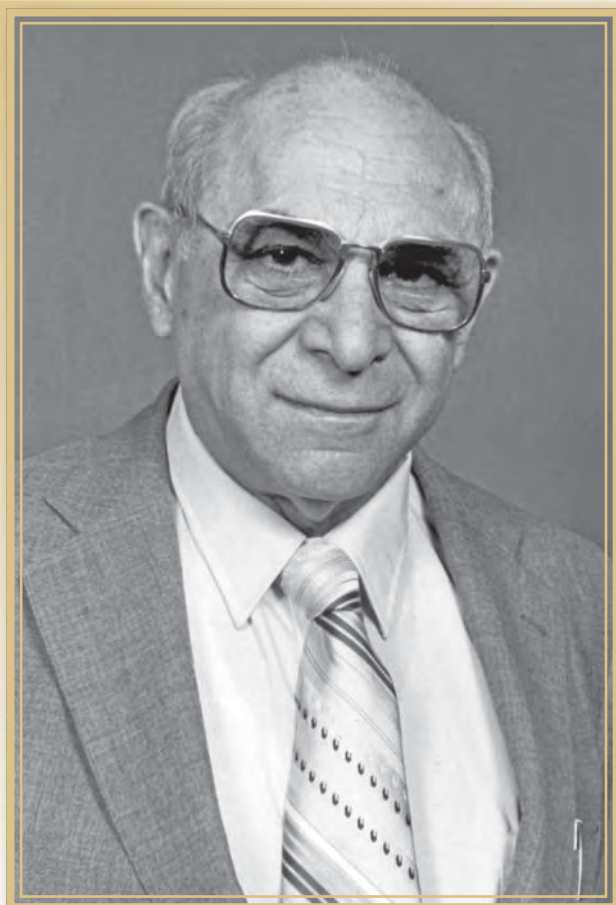


Morris Karpen *A Man with Vision and Ideas*



Morris Karpen (1916-2002) was a modest man who never sought recognition for his accomplishments or his generosity. Respectful of each and every person, he touched the lives of many. He is remembered for his energy and initiative as well as a mentor and caring benefactor.

“The generosity with which Morris lived his life was and forever will be an inspiration to us all.” UNCA Chancellor James Mullen.



Morris Karpen pictured here in 1929, at the age of thirteen, as a Bar Mitzvah (Jewish rite of passage into adulthood). This religious training influenced his philosophy of life. Morris always stood up for people who are not able to represent themselves and he pursued social issues even if they were not popular. He believed that communication and coordination were a much better use of energy than conflict. “He was a kind and gentle individual who made us feel better about being members of the human community” said Warren Williams in a tribute to Morris.



The Karpens were a working class family who lived in New York City. After completing high school, Morris attended Mechanics Institute, a tuition-free technical school for people working in the building trades. There he learned drafting and three-dimensional thinking, skills which were the foundation of his career. The picture above is New York City Public School 62, Bronx, New York. Morris is the 4th from the left in the last row.



Morris was a hands-on type of leader. He designed and built several Karpen Steel facilities and some of the equipment as well as several family homes. He always treated his employees as family, instituting family-supportive programs and female-supportive programs before they were common place. Morris cared for his employees and offered many opportunities for them to do well and make a good living. He was a fatherly figure one would not hesitate to go to for advice or learning. By promoting labor practices not common in a craft industry, he insured that he always had qualified workers. His philosophy was that one should hire the best people you can find and let them do their job. “They might not do things exactly the way you would, but you might be surprised to see that their ways are actually better than your way.” He once said. In addition to his mechanical abilities, Morris was a successful vegetable gardener. The picture above was taken at the Karpen Steel factory, Morris is on the very left.



The original sign from Karpen Steel in Farmingdale, New York. Willing to take risks, with little money, and lots of hope, perseverance, and know-how, Morris founded the company in 1950. He had an incredible intellect and could take an idea and turn it into something that would have meaning. In his 70's he was still thinking of new ideas.



Karpen Steel Products became successful by filling a niche. They manufactured fire-rated doors and frames in custom sizes and shapes and promised 10-day delivery, which transformed the hollow metal industry.

Helping The Community

The Karpens spent more than 25 years donating their time, energy and money to a variety of causes and organizations. “We tried to help in the community where we saw need.” Leah said. Their generosity launched nonprofit groups and endowed Karpen and Robinson Halls at UNC Asheville. At Warren Wilson College their donations brought students to Western North Carolina from around the world and built Morris’ pavilion. They have also given seed grants for Helpmate battered women’s shelter; Hospitality House transitional faculties for homeless men and women; Self-help Credit Union’s western office and its Working Women’s Loan Fund and WNC Habitat for Humanity. Other donations included the Laurel Forum in Karpen Hall, the YWCA, Manna Food Bank, Asheville Art Museum, Buncombe County Literacy Council, and Congregation Beth Ha Tephila.



Leah and Morris Karpen in 1987. Wed in 1944 while Morris was serving in the army in World War II, they were devoted to each other. When Leah brought Morris to meet her family her father, Dr. Samuel Robinson (Robinson Hall) took Morris on a hike, 5 miles straight up a mountain and 5 miles back down. Morris felt this was a test, which he later said he must have passed, as he was accepted into the family.



Positive thinking and hard work! When Morris retired, he and his wife, Leah, moved back to her home town, Asheville, North Carolina. Morris was a workaholic and retirement was not for him. He soon started two businesses in Weaverville, North Carolina: a new Karpen Steel factory and Laser Precision Cutting. The latter company offers a faster, more economical method to produce parts for sheet metal and machine shops by cutting the metal with a laser instead of using traditional machining methods. Being in retirement businesses, Morris was able to focus on sharing his knowledge with younger workers. After a trip to China, Morris explained this philosophy: “I want to use the brains of older people to teach the young.”



In 1994 the Karpens learned of the scarcity of soccer fields. This prompted Morris to make one of his most visible and valuable contributions. He donated the property next to Karpen Steel for use as youth soccer fields. This gift has helped thousands of children learn skills they might otherwise not have had the opportunity to learn and was the donation which made Morris the proudest. “Seeing the children playing there was all I needed.” he said.

