

D.L. “Dally” Willis, a member of the Texas Labor Hall of Fame who showed generations of labor lobbyists how to win friends at the Texas Legislature, died over the weekend at the age of 97.

A long-time member of the Texas AFL-CIO Executive Board and President of the Permian Basin Central Labor Council, Willis had been in a nursing home for years and finally entered hospice care, but his mind remained strong. He attended the 2017 Labor Day picnic in Odessa. He had been integral in organizing that annual event 60 years earlier. No Labor Day celebration in Texas has received more consistent or deeper news coverage than the one held each year in Odessa.

Brother Willis’s labor career began with the origins of the Texas AFL-CIO in the late 1950s. A contemporary of legendary Texas AFL-CIO President Hank Brown, he was for decades the friendly face of the United Labor Legislative Committee (ULLCO), lobbying for the Communications Workers of America and the state labor federation and becoming an institution at the Capitol.

The density of the labor movement in the Permian Basin doesn’t quite reach the level of popcorn, but for more than 50 years, Willis made sure the Central Labor Council popped loudly. Willis chartered the organization in 1961. The Permian Basin CLC has punched above its weight and continues to do so to this day in large part because Willis gave the organization his heart and soul on a daily basis while preparing multiple generations for leadership.

I saw Willis for the first time in 1984 on my initial day covering my first legislative session for the San Antonio Light. It was the start of a special session that led to House Bill 72, a major education reform bill, and the first time I ever walked into the House as anything but a tourist. I have never forgotten that while I was still trying to match the names of the San Antonio delegation to the people inside, Willis called me out by name to say hello. I thought at first he was an amazingly well-briefed doorway greeter for the House, because he was there every day wishing lawmakers and reporters well on a first-name basis. I learned before long that Willis was the official eyes and ears for ULLCO. Years later, when the television feed for the Texas House became widely available, union members across the Capitol complex took note that the camera in the rear balcony confirmed Willis was practically always in the same seat watching House proceedings after an hour or so of greeting entrants. His reports to ULLCO on what had transpired in the House had an eye for both legislative and political detail.

Willis was also often in House offices, at virtually every labor action related to the Legislature and, on at least a few occasions, in the Cloak Room to wind down. A plain-spoken labor advocate, the word “ubiquitous” may have been invented to describe Willis, but he never would have used it. Willis was also part of a special Texas tradition that holds that a handshake is worth more in sealing a deal than any piece of paper could be; he lived by his word and he expected others to do so as well.

Because the Texas Legislature formally works a part-time schedule, Willis also found time to go to Washington, D.C., and help CWA and the AFL-CIO lobby Congress.

Willis punctuated his friendliness toward lawmakers by recognizing special occasions. On Valentine's Day, if you were walking into the Texas House, you got a cloth heart sticker. He gave out shamrock stickers on St. Patrick's Day, bunnies ahead of Easter and bluebonnets when the wildflowers bloomed.

"Dally Willis lived union solidarity every day of his life," Texas AFL-CIO President **Rick Levy** said. "Dally taught us that no matter how right you may be or think you may be on a legislative issue, the human ingredients often make all the difference in the outcome."

Willis was a yellow-dog Democrat (and delegate to the 2000 Democratic National Convention), but he lobbied on a bipartisan basis. The goodwill he generated proved valuable again and again to labor's program. Willis was honored on several occasions by the House, and was recognized more than once by Rep. Tom Craddick, R-Midland, during and after Craddick's speakership.

Every legislative session, the United Labor Legislative Committee holds an organizing session ahead of its daily meetings on any day lawmakers meet. Willis was always the first to offer instruction, and his spiel invariably began with these words, or slight variations thereof: "The best advice I can give you on how to lobby the Texas Legislature is to remember three things. First, be nice. Second, be nice. And third, be nice." That fundamental advice – which in Texas labor circles is similar to the story about **Vince Lombardi's** starting every Green Bay Packers football camp with the remark, "Gentlemen, this is a football" – was accompanied by a deep well of practical knowledge on how to work issues effectively. Scores of ULLCO participants were introduced to lobbying skills at Willis's knee.

"Dally Willis was nice," Levy said, "but he could also be tough and tenacious in promoting better livelihoods for all workers. He set a standard for our organization that will never go away. We are proud to have known him."

Born in Cleburne in 1920, Willis became a Marine after high school and served in the Pacific theater during World War II. Willis worked for AT&T and its successors, joining CWA Local 6127. He and his wife Margaret reared three sons.

A funeral service for Willis has been set for 10 a.m. Thursday, Oct. 12, at the Westside Church of Christ, 4410 W. Illinois Ave., in Midland. Visitation will take place 5:30-7:30 p.m. Wednesday, Oct. 11 at Nalley-Pickle & Welch Funeral Home & Crematory, 3800 N. Big Spring St., in Midland.

In lieu of flowers, the family has requested that donations be made to Westside Church of Christ or to Midland Hospice.