

Austin (and Marathon) loses a long-time political consultant

By Joe Holley

HAROLD LEE COOK III

Jan. 16, 1961 -- Nov. 10, 2022

Harold Cook, a longtime Austin political consultant and commentator whose clients included President Bill Clinton, Gov. Ann Richards and scores of other Democratic candidates and officeholders, died on Nov. 10, 2022, from complications of atrial fibrillation at his “western headquarters” in his adopted hometown, Marathon, Texas. He was 61.

Brash and big-hearted, a political junky who loved the game almost as much as he loved his native Texas, Harold was a partisan Democrat from the crown of his big, white hat to the soles of his well-worn cowboy boots, and yet his vast stable of friends included politicians and political operatives on the opposite side of the barbed-wire fence. He was serious about politics and political issues, but he didn’t take himself all that seriously.

Who else but Harold Cook could have managed 11 fractious Democratic state senators who high-tailed it to Albuquerque in 2003 to break quorum in a desperate effort to block passage of Republican-sponsored redistricting legislation. Harold helped keep the Texas lawmakers occupied in the Land of Enchantment for 46 days before they trudged back to Austin to face the inevitable.

“He knew how to do the hard work of strategy in a way that felt easier than it was,” said former Austin mayor and state Sen. Kirk Watson, speaking to Spectrum News. “That was because of his detailed thoughts about what was going on and his sense of humor, which was always just under the surface.”

He was born Harold Lee Cook III – thus the nickname Tres – in Houston on Jan. 16, 1961. Graduating from Bellaire High School in Houston in 1979, he worked on offshore oil rigs for a few years, played and sang in piano bars and then received his undergraduate degree from the University of Houston in 1988.

His first political job was serving as an aide to former state Rep. Debra Danburg, D-Houston. He also worked closely with former Land Commissioner Garry

Mauro, former Texas Secretary of State John Hannah, Jr., and dozens of other elected officials and organizations.

He served as executive director of the Texas Democratic Party in the late 1990s. Wayne Hamilton, his Republican Party counterpart, got to know him well.

"Our headaches were exactly the same, even if our issues were different. That's how we became friends," Hamilton told Spectrum News. "Any time we shared a meal together, we were merciless on each other. Anything was fair game. To think he's gone makes me very sad."

Harold later became a featured commentator on Time Warner's "Capitol Tonight" TV show, where his astute observations were served with a generous seasoning of peppery wit. On the show, Harold was regularly paired with Republican operatives Ted Delisi or Matt Mackowiak, both of whom considered him a friend despite their sharp political differences.

"Harold was old school," Mackowiak tweeted. "He was brilliant, funny, a storyteller and a historian. He was a mensch. Great fun to be with."

Current Texas Democratic Party Chair Gilberto Hinojosa recalled his predecessor's leadership ability. "Harold had a truly magnetic personality — everyone who met him was charmed by his remarkably quick wit," he said. "He had a sense of humor that would fill a room and inspire all of us to find that balance between taking our values seriously but ourselves less so."

"He was a pro," said veteran political consultant Bill Miller. "In our profession, that is the highest accolade."

A longtime Austin resident and Capitol fixture, Harold discovered Marathon in far West Texas in the early 1990s. His close friend, the noted newspaper columnist and author Molly Ivins, happened upon the laid-back, unpretentious little town earlier and planned to build a writer's cabin on a plot of land she owned, but when she realized that her breast cancer was terminal, she sold the property to Harold. He eventually built an exquisite one-bedroom, one-bath casita, with spectacular front-porch views of the Glass Mountains and Santiago Peak. He shared the house with Travis, a big, grinning galoot of a dog who loved bounding down the front-porch steps and greeting guests at the gate.

Harold began spending more and more time in Marathon, particularly during the pandemic, and was a regular for the weekly burger night at the French Grocery (now offering the Harold Burger in his honor), at the Gage Hotel's White Buffalo Bar (where his drink of choice was "ranch water"), with friends at Brick Vault

BBQ and as part of festive holiday get-togethers around town. Although he kept his house in Austin, Marathon became his home (and Travis's).

"He loved entertaining," his long-time friend Rachel Truair wrote on Facebook.

"Holding court and sipping chilled tequila watching the West Texas sunset was Harold in his element."

"Harold Cook was a force of nature, and friendship, in Texas politics," political consultant Russ Tidwell, a fellow Marathonian and decades-long friend, wrote on Facebook. "He will be sorely missed."

He was preceded in death by his parents, Martha Rondeaux Cook and Harold L. Cook, Jr., and is survived by his sister, Marty Payne, and her husband, Tom, of Boise, Idaho; his nephew, Matthew Payne; and his loyal canine companion, Travis. His family extends special love and gratitude to his Marathon family: Russ Tidwell, Tom and Rosalinda Crase, Jenn and Kody Rakowitz, and Kathy and Roger Pinckney; and to his Austin family, Meredith and Stratton Delk.

In lieu of flowers, Harold would have loved for his friends to support the Marathon Volunteer Fire Department and the Marathon Public Library. His sister expresses her heartfelt thanks to the fire department; the Brewster County Sheriff's Department and the Gage Hotel for their compassionate assistance.

Austin resident Joe Holley is a columnist and editorial writer for the Houston Chronicle.