

In Memoriam: Hugh McElroy

Founder of Luminarias, 1938 – 2025

Hugh McElroy, beloved founder of Luminarias and a lifelong advocate for education and human dignity, **completed his earthly journey Tuesday, August 12, 2025, following a rich life of service, reflection, and profound compassion.** A native of Saint Paul, Minnesota, Hugh spent his 87 years listening deeply to the needs of the world—and responding with grace, conviction, and action.



Hugh McElroy, known affectionately as 'Papa Hugh' to the young women of Luminarias.

Born in 1938, Hugh graduated from Cretin High School and briefly entered religious life with the Christian Brothers before attending Saint John's University and later Nazareth Hall Seminary. Despite his early uncertainty about vocation, **Hugh's spiritual curiosity remained constant**, eventually guiding him to roles as a soldier, scholar, businessman, father, mentor, and philanthropist. He often said he spent much of his early adult life searching for the “fire in his belly”—a purpose beyond success.


That fire began to kindle during his time at 3M, where Hugh served in sales and executive roles for three decades. His professional path brought financial security, global travel, and comfort—**but it was during business trips to India, Brazil, and Southeast Asia that his soul was stirred.** The poverty he witnessed haunted him, pushing him to reflect on his privilege and deepen his understanding of stewardship. He began to ask deeper questions about the purpose of his life, and how he could use his abundance to address the inequities he could no longer ignore.

In the late 1990s, Hugh shifted from success to significance. **He sponsored children through international nonprofits** and began forging personal relationships with young people he supported, visiting regularly and offering not only financial help but emotional encouragement. His connection to Guatemala deepened, especially as he began to notice the gender-based disparities Indigenous girls faced—limited schooling, domestic burdens, and early motherhood.

In retirement, Hugh turned intention into impact. **In 2000, he joined a Common Hope mission trip to Guatemala to help with building projects in communities of the very poor.** In his two weeks there he became familiar with families, their young sons and daughters—an experience

that reignited his passion for mentoring underserved youth. Compelled to do more, he returned to Antigua, Guatemala to learn Spanish and integrate more fully into the local culture. His encounters with children—especially girls lacking opportunity—stoked the fire in his soul that had long been smoldering to find a cause greater than self.

In 2014, at the age of 75, Hugh founded *Luminarias*—a home for adolescent Indigenous Guatemalan girls in San Lucas Sacatepéquez. Its mission: to provide not only a safe and nurturing environment, but also educational access, spiritual formation, and character development. Inspired by his belief that one should use their money to do good while they're still alive, Hugh funded the program's early years himself. **The name *Luminarias*, meaning "women who shine," reflected Hugh's vision** to cultivate generations of strong, compassionate, and empowered women.



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– HUGH MCELROY*

Luminarias began with fifteen girls living in a rented home. Hugh, always practical and hands-on, was involved in every detail—from renovations to staffing to curriculum design. **He envisioned not just an education, but a formation of character and spirit**, centered on faith, discipline, and love. By 2019, the organization had built its own permanent facility, a physical reflection of the hope and transformation it fostered.

Hugh was known to many in Guatemala as "Papa Hugh." He was a fixture in the girls' lives—tutoring, mentoring, attending weekly Skype calls, and visiting Guatemala several times a year even into his 80s. **His gentle encouragement and unwavering belief in their potential changed the course of many lives.** He was also instrumental in building the U.S. nonprofit structure behind *Luminarias*, serving on the Board of Directors, recruiting supporters, and sustaining the project with his characteristic optimism.

Those who worked with Hugh remember his steadiness in hard times. When budgets were tight or obstacles daunting, he would often say, "We've come too far to turn back. The light is still burning." That light—the fire that once flickered inside him—**now illuminates the path for others.** In a 2018 interview, Hugh said, "There is no greater joy than witnessing transformation—especially in those the world so often overlooks. If I can be part of even one girl's journey to discovering her worth, then my life has meant something."

Today, the light of *Luminarias* shines on through the dozens of young women who have passed through its doors and the dedicated team who carry Hugh's vision forward. As he prepared for

his final transition over recent weeks, Hugh did so knowing that the ripple effects of his courage and compassion will continue to shape lives long after his own has come to rest.

He is survived by his son, grandchildren, siblings, and other family members, along with a global community of friends and admirers who were touched by his generosity and humility. **Most significantly, his life is memorialized in the lives of more than 100 young women who have been impacted** by the Luminarias Project, staff, and board members. Hugh's journey reminds us all that one life, fully given, can inspire and support many others.

Visitation will be held Tuesday, August 19 from 5:00 to 8:00 p.m., at [O'Halloran and Murphy Funeral Home](#), 575 S. Snelling Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55116.

The Funeral Mass will take place Wednesday, August 20, at 11:00 a.m., at [Nativity of Our Lord Parish](#), 1938 Stanford Ave, St Paul, MN 55105.

In lieu of flowers, donations
may be made in Hugh's honor
to Luminarias at
www.luminariasproject.com

