

# Peter B. Lewis, Philanthropist Who Led Progressive Auto Insurance, Dies at 80

By EMMA G. FITZSIMMONS

Peter B. Lewis, who turned the 100-employee insurance firm co-founded by his father into one of the nation's largest auto insurance companies, the Progressive Corporation, by insuring high-risk drivers and high-end sports cars, and who became an outspoken and sometimes quarrelsome supporter of liberal causes and the arts, died on Saturday at his home in Coconut Grove, Fla. He was 80.

The cause was a heart attack, his philanthropic adviser, Jennifer Frutchy, said.

Mr. Lewis led Progressive for 35 years, helping it grow to 28,000 employees today and more than \$16 billion in annual sales. It is perhaps best known for its ubiquitous television commercials featuring Flo, a sales clerk in a Progressive superstore.

Under Mr. Lewis, the company found a profitable specialty: covering drivers who were rejected by other insurers. Progressive offered plans to customers with bad driving records, those deemed too young or too old, and owners of fast cars like Maseratis and Lamborghinis.

The company's strong financial performance validated the view that even bad risks can be insured profitably, provided the premiums are high enough.

Mr. Lewis wanted the company to do things differently than other auto insurance companies, Glenn M. Renwick, the company's current chief executive, said on Sunday. Progressive was the first company, for example, to give customers comparison rates for policies from its competitors, Mr. Renwick said.

But over the years, Mr. Lewis drew more attention for his philanthropic efforts. He gave away almost half of his \$1 billion for-

tune to various causes, including the Center for American Progress and the American Civil Liberties Union, and he famously ended his large donations to the Guggenheim Museum after clashing with its director.

In recent years, he had focused on efforts to legalize marijuana, a campaign he said he supported after using the drug to manage the pain when he had part of a leg amputated in 1998.

Peter Benjamin Lewis was born in Cleveland on Nov. 11, 1933, the son of Joseph Lewis, who co-founded the Progressive Mutual Insurance Company with Jack Green, and the former Helen Rosenfeld. He attended Prince-

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*Expanding a firm by offering coverage for high-risk drivers and high-end cars.*

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ton University and then joined his father's company. He became chief executive in 1965 and retired in 2000.

Some called him eccentric, a label Mr. Lewis did not dispute. Tall and athletic, he favored black Stetson hats and once attended a company board meeting on Halloween dressed as the Lone Ranger. He also called his 255-foot yacht the Lone Ranger.

Others criticized him as a demanding manager. In 1990, after several top officers left the company, Mr. Lewis delighted in telling The New York Times that he had "fired more Harvard Business School graduates than most other insurance companies have hired."

Controversy often followed Mr. Lewis in his role as a philanthropist. He gave generously to many organizations, but threatened to withdraw his support when he did not approve of management decisions.

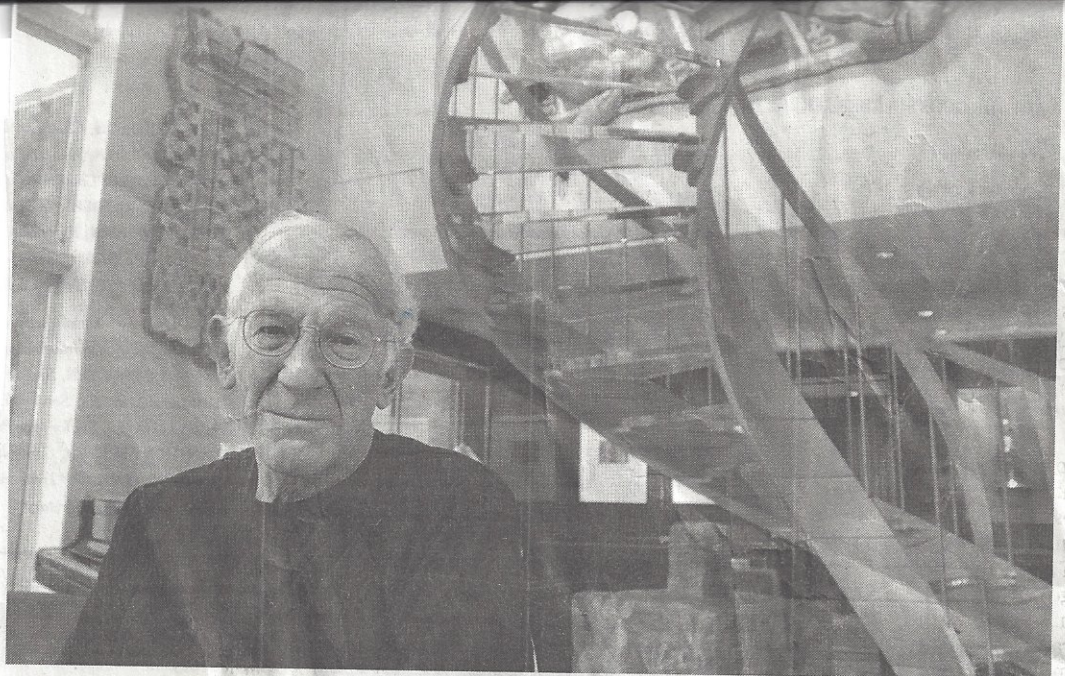
For years, Mr. Lewis was the biggest individual patron of the Guggenheim Museum in New York, donating almost \$77 million over 11 years. But in 2005, he resigned as chairman of the museum's board and withdrew his financial support because he wanted the museum to focus on New York rather than expanding abroad.

Before that, he staged a year-long boycott of cultural and charitable organizations in Cleveland, where Progressive is based, after a dispute with the board of Case Western Reserve University. Mr. Lewis had agreed to pay for a Frank Gehry-designed building on campus, but he was frustrated when the costs of the project ballooned and he wanted the board to resign.

"I really get a smile that people think they have a right to even suggest how I give my money away," he said during his boycott. "I have no mandate to give a dime to anybody."

The building, notable for its flowing sheets of steel and glass, ended up being built with \$36.9 million in donations from Mr. Lewis and bears his name.

Mr. Lewis had been a fan of Mr. Gehry's work for years, and the men collaborated in the 1980s on a dream home for Mr. Lewis in suburban Cleveland, but their plans went comically awry. They could not agree on what the home should look like, and after 11 years of discussions, with the proposed budget reaching \$82 million, Mr. Lewis called off the project.



DAVID MAXWELL

The billionaire Peter B. Lewis, seen in 2002, donated millions to the arts and to liberal causes.

There were no hard feelings between the two, who still worked together on the university building. In 1997, Mr. Gehry compared his years of working for Mr. Lewis to a MacArthur grant "genius award," saying that during that time he had honed many of the ideas that have since found life in other buildings, including the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain.

Over the years, Mr. Lewis donated more than \$220 million to Princeton University, his alma mater, and he served on its board until last June.

Mr. Lewis contributed millions

of dollars to Democratic campaigns, but he grew frustrated after John Kerry lost his presidential bid in 2004. He had given more than \$20 million to Democratic-oriented groups that year.

After that, he turned his attention to financing groups that would set up a permanent infrastructure for Democrats, including the Center for American Progress and Media Matters for America.

Mr. Lewis's first marriage, to the former Toby Devan, ended in divorce in 1981.

Survivors include his wife, Janet Rosel Lewis; three children

from his first marriage, Ivy, Jonathan and Adam Lewis; a brother, Daniel; and five grandchildren.

In 2012, Mr. Lewis signed the Giving Pledge, a campaign organized by Bill Gates and Warren E. Buffett to get the world's richest people to dedicate the majority of their wealth to philanthropy.

In a letter to the group, Mr. Lewis said: "Seeing results flow from my gifts is my greatest pleasure as a philanthropist — whether exonerating a jailed innocent or completing a Frank Gehry building. I want to enjoy my philanthropy."