

Not the retiring type: These three prominent Dallas-area seniors are still going strong in their 80s

They thrive on meaningful careers in faith-based nonprofits, medicine and politics.



Tillie Burgin co-founded Mission Arlington in 1986 with her husband, Bob, and they remain active in the organization to this day. “I’m just grateful that the Lord lets us do His work,” the 84-year-old says. (Lynda M. González / Staff Photographer)

By [Harriet L. Blake](#)

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The past few months have been filled with inspiring examples of North Americans who have worked well into their senior years. Just think of those we’ve lost in 2020: Ruth Bader Ginsburg, famous for working from her hospital bed; John Lewis, who continued to serve Congress despite battling pancreatic cancer; and Alex Trebek, who taped his last *Jeopardy!* game show days before his death.

While some prefer to throw in the towel on work, kick back and rest on their laurels, more people are working well into their later years. According to AARP and the U.S. Census

Bureau, fewer people are retiring in their 60s, whether for financial reasons or because they enjoy what they do.

We asked Tillie Burgin, Dr. Kenneth Cooper and U.S. Rep. Eddie Bernice Johnson — well-known in their fields of faith-based nonprofits, medicine and politics — what keeps them motivated. Not surprisingly, they all love their work and feel they still have plenty to contribute.

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Filling the never-ending need: Tillie Burgin, 84

Executive director, Mission Arlington

Tillie and Bob Burgin founded Mission Arlington in 1986. The couple and their two young sons spent 10 years as missionaries in South Korea. When they returned to her hometown of Arlington in 1978, Tillie Burgin says, they couldn't get past the thought: "If you can do missions in Korea, why can't you do missions in Arlington?"

"I had a good job," she says. "I was the personnel director for the [Arlington] school district. Bob served as vice principal and principal at several Arlington junior and high schools and eventually became associate dean of the School of Education at Dallas Baptist University. But

That something emerged in summer 1986 in a Bible study group at a woman's apartment. "We began to see that people were hungry and also needed clothing. We started taking food and clothes to the apartment.



Mission Arlington/Mission Metroplex director Tillie Burgin (left) prays with Regina Grissom, the organization's assistant child care director. Burgin and her husband were missionaries in South Korea before returning to the U.S. (1998 File Photo / Arlington Morning News)

“People would come up to us asking what we were doing about other needs, such as child care or dental. Then we would ask God to show us how we could meet those needs,” Burgin says.

The Burgin family, with the help of First Baptist Church of Arlington, established a number of apartment Bible studies, known as “congregations” in the church’s parlance. From these grass-roots efforts began what is now Mission Arlington/Mission Metroplex, the nonprofit under which their many social programs are run with the help of staff and thousands of volunteers. They now have 360 locations. As Burgin describes it: “We bring church to the people.”

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On a recent rainy day at the mission headquarters in downtown Arlington, staffers and volunteers were busy accepting donations. A question came up: Would they accept a trunk full of medical supplies? The staff member went inside and came back with a spry woman smartly dressed in a pantsuit. “Sure, we’ll take those,” she said with a warm smile and grabbed a couple of boxes. “Follow me.” It was Burgin. During an impromptu tour, she proudly explained that not only does the organization provide clothing and food but also medical and dental services for their guests.

The entire family is involved. Bob Burgin is a pastor at one of the congregations. Both Burgin sons are graduates of Baylor University and ordained ministers. Jim Burgin is the pastor of Grace Street Fellowship, one of Mission Arlington's congregations. Rick Burgin runs the mission's counseling services and is a volunteer chaplain for the Arlington Police Department.

So what is Tillie Burgin's motivation? "I'm just grateful that the Lord lets us do His work," she says.

"A woman just drove by the other day. She was turning 90. She told me, 'Slow down or you'll catch up to me!'"

And that's fine by her.

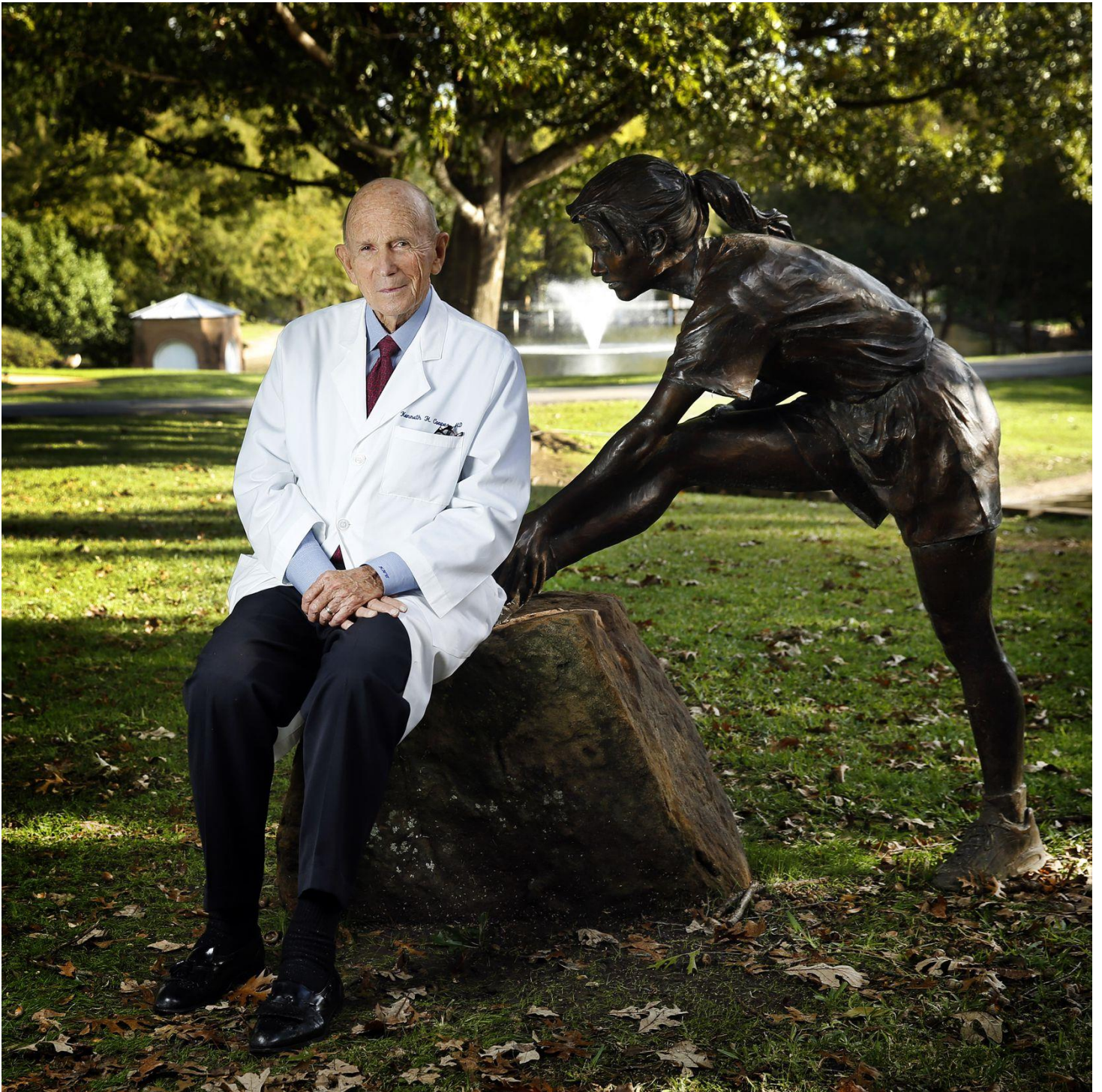
Walking the walk: Dr. Kenneth Cooper, 89

Founder of the Cooper Aerobics Center and chairman emeritus of the Cooper Institute.

Dr. Kenneth Cooper is excited.

He can't say enough the importance of exercise and his overall philosophy on life.

Almost 90, Cooper sees patients five days a week. He gets to the office at 7 a.m., leaves about 5.30 p.m., works out for one hour at the Aerobics Center, goes home and has dinner with Millie, his wife of 61 years. After dinner, he walks the dogs for a half-hour. He and Millie occasionally take time off to go to their second home at Rough Creek Ranch near Glen Rose.



Dr. Kenneth Cooper, 89, is founder of the Cooper Aerobics Center and chairman emeritus of the Cooper Institute. (Tom Fox / Staff Photographer)

Cooper is in his 64th year of practicing medicine. He says he became enlightened about fitness at age 29. He had been a competitive athlete in high school and college, weighing 164 pounds. But with the demands of medical school and an internship, he was unable to exercise and gained 40 pounds. When he went water skiing for the first time in eight years and tried to ski a slalom course, he developed cardiac arrhythmia. He thought he was having a heart attack. By the time he got to the emergency room, the arrhythmia disappeared and a thorough diagnostic workup came to the conclusion that, as he describes it: “Doc, you are fat and out of shape.”

That motivated him to lose the weight, and he ran his first marathon one year later. “The response that I had to losing weight and getting back into shape actually changed my career. ... Feeling so much better motivated me to start concentrating on the prevention of disease, and I’ve weighed the same for over 50 years.”

How does he stay so energized? “I look forward to coming to work.” His patient caseload at the Cooper Clinic fell during the early days of the coronavirus, but now the numbers are back to their normal of about 140 to 150 patients a week. A documentary on Dr. Cooper is due to be released in the spring of 2021.

“So far,” he says, “I’ve shown no signs of Alzheimer’s. We have proven that high levels of fitness can have a dramatic effect on reducing the chances of Alzheimer’s ... and trim versus fat and inactive. There also is a 40 percent reduction in the cost of care, too, when people stay fit.”

Keeping up with Cooper in a conversation takes energy because he hardly stops for a breath. Does he sleep? Not much. “I try to get 6 to 7 hours. I go to bed about midnight and usually sleep well. I usually work a 10- to 12-hour day, so before going home, exercising relieves my stress.”

Powering up immunity is key to protect against diseases such as COVID-19, he says. Exercise, veggies and healthy habits build up resistance to disease, he says. He is excited about indications that Vitamin D supplements can help with that.

His motto: “It’s cheaper and more effective to prevent disease than it is to find a cure — and that goes for Alzheimer’s and COVID.”

A lifetime of serving: Eddie Bernice Johnson, 84

U.S. representative, House District 30

U.S. Rep. Johnson is the first registered nurse to be elected to Congress and the first Black American woman ever elected to public office from Dallas.

Johnson, who hails from a civic-minded family, loved her career but realized she had other dreams to pursue. She entered politics in 1972 and was just re-elected to Texas' 30th congressional district with 77.5 percent of the vote.

A Waco native, Johnson earned her nursing diploma in 1956 at St. Mary’s College of Notre Dame, Indiana. Also that year, she married Lacey Kirk Johnson. They had one son, Kirk. Returning to Texas, she later earned a bachelor’s in nursing from Texas Christian University and served as chief psychiatric nurse and psychotherapist at the Veterans Administration Hospital in Dallas for 16 years before entering politics in 1972.



U.S. Rep. Eddie Bernice Johnson, 85, is the first registered nurse to be elected to Congress and the first Black American woman ever elected to public office from Dallas. (Vernon Bryant / Staff Photographer)

She was busy, in a good career — and restless. “I was not comfortable not being involved. I needed to do something with my time off.” She ran for a seat in the Texas House of Representatives and won in a landslide.

Choosing a political career and juggling a family was a balancing act. “My family and I talked about it. Our son grew up with me being in office. Even after the divorce [1970], my ex-husband worked on my campaigns. Plus I had siblings and my mother who all helped out.”

Learning never stops for Johnson. In 1976, Johnson received a masters in public administration from Southern Methodist University. She says when it came to politics, “I learned by trial and error how to get things done. I didn’t really have a role model. I do think men do things differently than women.”

She once told the *Chicago Tribune*: “Being a woman and being Black is perhaps a double handicap. ... When you see who’s in the important huddles, who’s making the important decisions, it’s men.”

She left the Texas Legislature in 1977, when President Jimmy Carter appointed her to be regional director for the then-named Department of Health, Education and Welfare. When Carter left office in 1980, Johnson left politics briefly to become a business consultant in

Dallas. In 1986, she ran for office again, becoming a Texas state senator. And in 1992, she was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. During her nearly three decades in the House, Johnson has focused on jobs and health care.

In terms of a health routine — sleep, eating right and exercising — Johnson says, “I don’t do any of these very well. I tend to do most my work at night. ... I still exercise. I have set up a gym at home since I can’t go to the gym. I always lived where I had access to a gym. I’ve actually spent some vacation time at Cooper Aerobics. If I have a day with no agenda, I get bored. I need to have something to do seven days a week. You have to keep your mind active.”

She says she enjoys working. “I get satisfaction from what I am able to bring home to my Dallas constituents,” she says. “I know in some jobs, people have achieved everything they wanted to and know it’s time to go. Now, I’ve sometimes had that feeling, but I get encouraged not to leave. In the past 10 years, when I’ve announced I might retire, I keep getting talked out of it!”

“The question is, can someone step in and pick up where I left off? I’m not sure.”

“I want to always be involved as long as I can be. There are so many things to be done. Everyone can pitch in and make a difference. It’s the challenges that keep us going.”



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