



Bill Costen

Notable: Ed Yost Master Pilot Award

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Bill Costen, born William Hollis Costen is an African-American hot air balloon pilot, business owner, photojournalist, professional photographer, black memorabilia collector, curator, archivist and exhibitor. Born in Omaha, Nebraska in 1947, he grew up playing sports and earned a Boy Scouts of America Eagle Scout badge by the age of 13. He played football in high school and graduated from Central High in 1965. He attended the University of Nebraska in 1965 and transferred the next year to Morris Brown College in Atlanta, Georgia, where he graduated with a double major in mathematics and psychology and received a Bachelor of Science degree in 1970.

During the summers of his college years, Costen worked as a porter on the Union Pacific Railroad with train runs from Omaha to Idaho, Utah, Wyoming and Denver Colorado. After graduation, the Buffalo Bills professional football team drafted him as a defensive tackle. During his very first game, he realized a dream as he picked up the ball on a blocked punt and scored the only touchdown for Buffalo against the New York Jets. After leaving Buffalo, he played two years with their farm team, The Hartford Knights, located in Hartford, CT. For the next 14 years, he worked in the insurance industry at Travelers, CG/Aetna, CNA and CIGNA as a commercial property/casualty underwriter. Having an entrepreneurial spirit, he always wanted to own his own business.

Bill's ballooning career began in 1975 when he created and designed "The State of Connecticut Bicentennial Balloon," which was dedicated by Governor Ella Grasso. He became a Raven (Aerostar) Dealer and started Sky Endeavors with Jim Isler; a hot air balloon company dealing in sales, instruction, rides and promotions. Throughout the years, Bill has trained several people to become balloon pilots and has used his balloon for advertising purposes for many major corporations. He has given tether rides to thousands of people attending annual fairs and outdoor functions. He has done grand openings for car dealerships, restaurants, stores, malls and businesses across Connecticut. Schools have used his balloon to motivate, reward and entertain students. Many organizations have rewarded employees and supporters with gift certificates to fly at their leisure.

Bill has given balloon rides to thousands of people and has done numerous promotions for various companies and organizations. He has flown in balloon festivals and races all over the country, and has been featured in many newspapers and magazines. He was an active member of The International Professional Balloon Pilots Racing Association. Being the first African American commercial hot air balloon pilot in the country, he was featured in Ebony Magazine in 1977 and Black Enterprise in both 1981 and 1989. In 2016, he received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Balloon Federation of America called the "Ed Yost Master Pilot Award," which

recognizes lighter than air (LTA) pilots who have demonstrated professionalism, skill and aviation expertise by maintaining safe operations for 40 or more consecutive years as active pilots.

Bill has been President and CEO of Sky Endeavors LLC (hot air balloon promotions) since 1975; Owner of The Costen Cultural Exhibition (traveling exhibition) since 1988; Photojournalist for Northend Agents (African American newspaper in Hartford CT) and a professional photographer specializing in documenting historic and special events including sports, celebrities and politicians since 1999. He has been on the Board of Directors of the New England Air Museum of Windsor Locks CT since 1989, and has served as a deacon and church photographer at The First Cathedral in Bloomfield, CT since 1991. He has received community awards and has been a guest speaker for different organizations. In 2014, he received the June Archer & Eleven28 Entertainment's One Hundred Men of Color Award, which recognizes men of color in business, education, entrepreneurship, government, entertainment and service and the impact they have on the lives of people throughout their communities.

Bill's collecting interests originated in high school with his coin collection and saving his Eagle Scout uniform, badges and certificates. He also saved his railroad memorabilia from working on the Union Pacific Railroad during the summer of his college years. Being an avid archivist and collector, he created "The Costen Cultural Exhibition," a unique collection of rare photographs, ephemera, memorabilia, fine art and collectibles. The collection has been custom designed to travel to any location and show the contributions and accomplishments of Americans with an emphasis on African Americans throughout history. Topics address the interests of all age groups and include: Africa, slavery, civil rights, politics, government, invention, science, athletics, sports, aviation, military, music, dance, theater, literary arts, religion, radio, film, television and other forms of popular entertainment. It includes exhibitions on the history of "African American Golf," "The Tuskegee Airmen," "The Pullman Porters", a photographic history of "The Freedom Schooner Amistad" and "The History of Ballooning" which was displayed at FAVIA 225 in Philadelphia, PA.

The Costen Cultural Exhibition has been displayed at fundraising events, schools, colleges, universities, museums, historical societies, churches, community organizations and corporations.

Bill and his wife Lynda reside in Connecticut and have two married children. Jarrell, a graduate of Hampton University, works as a financial analyst. Chantal, a graduate of Howard University, worked as a television producer for BET and owns her own company, Made for T.V. Productions LLC. With a background in filmmaking, she is currently producing a documentary on her dad titled, "Balloon Man."

See additional pictures on following pages.



