

Martin “Bud” Mattern’s Legacy of Independent Thought

By Josh Ferencik

When Martin “Bud” Mattern left nearly \$1 million to the Cato Institute in his estate plans, he was securing a future for the principles and ideas that guided his own life.

“No matter what happens in life, you’ll end up alone. So you better learn to like yourself.” That life lesson—delivered with the blunt honesty that Martin “Bud” Mattern’s friends and family knew so well—captures a man who had spent his life walking an independent intellectual path, long before he realized he wasn’t walking it alone.

Born in 1942 near Lake Winnebago, Wisconsin, Bud was the youngest of 13 children in a household that valued ideas, music, and philosophy. His father owned and operated a grocery store, and the family fostered an environment where deep thinking flourished. Even as a child, Bud stood apart—brilliant but quiet, he didn’t speak until he was two years old, as though he were carefully

considering his words before offering them to the world. That became his trademark: He spoke only in facts, and compliments from him were rare treasures because they came as unvarnished truth.

A true polymath, Bud taught himself piano and was an avid reader. But it was during his five-decade career at Abbott Laboratories that his libertarian instincts crystallized into conviction. Working in pharmaceuticals, Bud witnessed firsthand what he saw as the FDA’s regulatory overreach—rules set by bureaucrats who knew less than the scientists and manufacturers developing lifesaving treatments. To Bud, this raised fundamental questions beyond just bureaucratic meddling: Who should make decisions, and by what authority?



What made Bud remarkable was that he developed these libertarian principles independently during the mid-20th century, when the modern libertarian movement was still finding its voice.

Then, in the 1970s, Bud discovered *Reason* magazine, and through it the newly founded Cato Institute. For someone who had spent years thinking he might be alone in his worldview, finding Cato was like stumbling into a hidden valley of kindred spirits. “He liked knowing someone else was thinking like him,” recalls his sister Roseann. “He thought this way before he even knew what a libertarian was, and it was a breath of fresh air to find out other people thought about the world this way.”

Bud’s home became a shrine to these ideas, with shelves displaying his cherished collection of Cato books alongside works by Ayn Rand. His best friend, Ben, whom he met at Abbott, now maintains this extensive library—a testament to Bud’s belief that ideas represent humanity’s greatest treasures.

Bud knew that “what sounds good often is not what would work,” and he valued the Cato Institute precisely because he could rely on its experts to be honest, objective, and principled, even when the truth was inconvenient.

“We don’t know if you ever had an opportunity to know Bud, but his values were your values,” his brother James wrote to Cato after Bud’s passing in July of 2024. “Our family is grateful that he discovered your institute to reinforce his philosophy during difficult times. You were a solace to him and therefore to us.”

That solace has now become a lasting legacy through Bud’s nearly \$1 million unrestricted bequest. After decades of evaluating ideas with the same rigor he once applied to pharmaceutical research, Bud



concluded that Cato could be trusted to advance liberty wisely and effectively.

In leaving this gift unrestricted, Bud demonstrated the same independent thinking that defined his life. He didn’t attempt to micromanage from beyond or impose specific priorities. Instead, he offered the ultimate compliment: complete confidence in Cato’s judgment and mission.

For a man who believed you must learn to like yourself because you’ll end up alone, Bud Mattern’s final act ensures that his ideas—and the movement that gave them a home—will never walk alone.

Bud’s story is a reminder that the most powerful legacies are measured not only in dollars but also in the ideas they preserve and carry forward. If Cato’s work has given you that same sense of intellectual grounding, consider how a legacy gift might extend those ideas to generations still searching for their own path to liberty.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Josh Ferencik, the associate director of development at Cato, is responsible for expanding the Institute’s community of supporters in the Northeast and Midwest.



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