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OUR VIEW

JAMES E. WINNER Jr./1929-2010

He deserves a 'Well done, good and faithful servant'

There's an old Turkish proverb which states: A lion sleeps in the heart of every brave man.

With the untimely death of James E. Winner Jr. in a car accident on Tuesday, the lion of local business and philanthropic endeavor can rest with his heart comforted that he will be remembered for the legacy he created.

Born into a simple Transfer farm family, Winner used his energy and talent to create a miniature empire comprised of industrial, retail and commercial businesses and educational institutions that are highly visible throughout our area.

Unlike executives of most international enterprises that shuffle businesses around the globe with little thought to consequences, Winner always made a point whenever possible to create here, to keep it here, to expand it here. All the while, he was a man of boundless energy.

In the end, the 81-year-old patriarch was able to point to dozens of projects around Mercer County that he either started or supported with contributions for the benefit of local people.

He was best known for developing The Club, a vehicle anti-theft device that launched him on the national stage. In the 1990s alone the product generated tens of millions of dollars for his Sharon-based Winner International company.

Many believe that's when his work began for local causes such as the Shoe Our Children campaign, United Way and countless other charities. But that simply wasn't the case — the widely popular product only enabled him to expand his philanthropic horizons.

In the days after Winner's death, people talked of his good deeds for them before he amassed his fortune. They were simple but heart-felt gestures.

When he first started out in business, Winner operated a retail store in Transfer and loaned his car to a teenage employee so the young man could drive his date to the prom.

Others remember him slipping them a \$20 bill so they could get a bite to eat, or talking with them in earnest to help solve a touchy family issue.

As time passed and his wealth accumulated, he was able to support bigger projects — most times quietly. He was a major donor to Buhl Farm Park in Hermitage, Prince of Peace Center in Farrell, Sharon Regional Health System and countless other organizations, including his place of worship, Grace Chapel Community Church in Hermitage.

But he felt an obligation to embrace civic causes as well, such as buying a police cruiser, without fanfare, for Sharon when the city was in

■ **THE ISSUE:** Jim Winner.

■ **WE SUGGEST:** The tragic death of the iconic Shenango Valley figure marks the end of a local era of an individual who was a giant in business and charity.

dire straits. It may sound like a cliché, but indeed, his community contributions are far too numerous to list here.

Oftentimes, people enjoying a measure of success distance themselves from others in a lower economic class. That was never the case with Winner. It was quite the opposite, in fact. He was always willing to talk to people regardless of their background or social status, and would stick his neck out if he believed the cause was a just one.

He never forgot about growing up dirt poor on that Transfer farm. Instead, he grew from those roots to practice the philanthropy that became his passion throughout a wonderful life.

A remarkable part of Winner's portfolio of achievement was that he often shouldered projects despite huge economic risks.

When he bought the former Westinghouse Electric Corp. plant in Sharon in 1999, he knew full well it was an environmental mess. Winner accepted responsibility for the final costly environmental cleanup of the site of the closed mill that had been placed on the federal Superfund list a decade earlier.

It required years of painstaking cleaning, bureaucratic reviews and millions of dollars, but that work is completed and the plant is available for occupancy. The project serves as a lasting monument to Winner's grit, guts and foresight.

When the local economy was in a tailspin during the dramatic industrial shift of the late 20th century, it would have been easy for him to abandon our area and stake a claim elsewhere. He opted to stay in the Shenango Valley and stick it out with the rest of us.

In a speech he gave at a Boy Scouts dinner in the late 1990s, Winner said when it was time for him to knock on the pearly gates, he wanted to be told, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

It takes strength to contemplate the end of one's life before an audience. Jim Winner had that strength and he earned his desired epitaph through his good works.

This humble and faithful servant will be missed by his family, his friends and his community more, perhaps, than he might have imagined.