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Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell talks with Jim Winner during an Aug. 14, 2004 visit to Winner Steel in Sharon to deliver state financing for expansion. Winner had since sold the business, which now operates as Sharon Coating.

Gene Paulson/Herald file

SHENANGO VALLEY

Winner's giving spirit remembered

Friends, associates recall good deeds

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While local friends and business associates of James E. Winner Jr. mourned his death, they recounted fond memories of the man they said continually gave back to the community in a variety of ways.

The 81-year-old Winner was killed in a car wreck Tuesday afternoon on a rural road in Clarion County near his vacation cabin.

Winner is best known for having developed The Club, a vehicle anti-theft device that in the 1990s alone generated tens of millions of dollars in profits for his Sharon-based

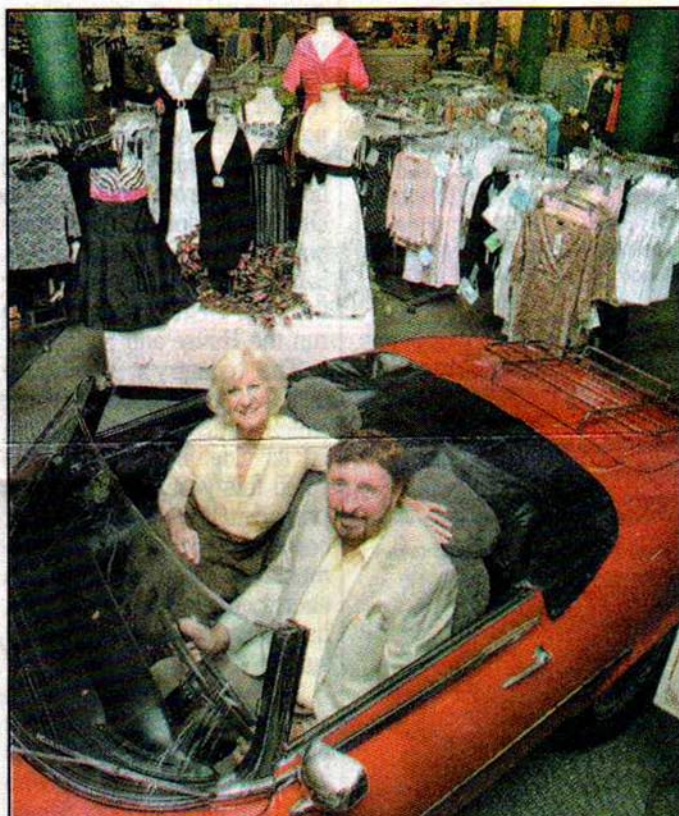


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Jim and Donna Winner in 2008, the year he received an honorary degree from Slippery Rock University. In 1988, the couple opened The Winner, at right, "the world's largest off-price ladies' fashion store" in what once had been a five-story downtown department store.

Winner International company. Over the years Winner invested heavily in local com-

See **WINNER**, page A-15



Jason Kapusta/Herald file

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Winner

Winner's giving spirit remembered

from page A-1

mercial and industrial properties as well as schools. But he also was a major benefactor to a number of charities and non-profit organizations.

Steve Gurgovits, chief executive officer of Hermitage-based FNB Corp., recounted how Winner took on a major project when he bought the sprawling former Westinghouse Electric Corp. complex in Sharon. He bought the industrial site in the late 1990s while it was in the midst of an environmental cleanup.

The site was on the federal Superfund list because the land and buildings were contaminated with chemicals used during years of manufacturing of electrical transformers. By taking ownership of the property, he was required to finish the cleanup — a huge financial gamble.

"He did this when he was at an age where most people would be slowing down," Gurgovits said. "He was willing to take the risks and do things here."

All of those interviewed agreed on one point: Despite Winner's immense success in the business world, he never put on airs and was always eager to talk to people regardless of their stature in the community.

The Rev. Larry Haynes, executive director of the Shenango Valley Foundation, recalled

how Winner would stop in at the office of Southwest Garden Economic Development Agency, a Farrell neighborhood organization, just to see how the group was faring.

George Gerhart, a former executive director of the Shenango Valley Chamber of Commerce, said Winner was involved in a number of charities, such as the Shoe Our Children campaign, through his Winner Foundation.

"He was genuinely concerned about people and made a lot of behind-the-scenes contributions," Gerhart said.

Gary "Moe" Meszaros, co-founder of Quaker Steak & Lube in Sharon, was involved in a number of projects over the years with Winner, such as the former Motorsports Museum in West Middlesex.

"Jim was wholeheartedly involved in the community," Meszaros said.

Sometimes it was Winner's simple gestures that stood out.

"When my father died, I got a letter from him offering his condolences," said Bill Strimbu, president of Strimbu Trucking, Brookfield. "He was staying at a hotel in Singapore but he still found the time and way to get me that letter. He always reached out whenever there was a problem."

Winner was also a major benefactor to Sharon Regional Health System.

"Mr. Winner extended very generous support to Sharon Regional numerous times over the years, as reflected in the Health System's Winner Cardiac Catheterization and Inter-

ventional Lab and the Winner EMS Educational Institute," said John Zidasek, Sharon Regional's chief executive officer. "Our thoughts and prayers go out to Mr. Winner's family and loved ones during this tragic time."

Winner had a significant impact on the Shenango Valley, and Sharon city officials who were in office as his business ventures took off said they respected his efforts and called his death a tragedy.

"He was a good man, and he's going to be sorely missed not only by the city of Sharon but by the Shenango Valley," former Sharon mayor and police chief Dave Ryan said.

"He was a real asset to the city," said former long-time Sharon councilman Fred Hoffman. "We didn't always agree on things, but Jim was very good to the city and very good to a lot of people, I know. He'll be missed, that's for sure."

Winner was a benefactor for the area, Ryan said.

"Without him can you imagine what Sharon would look like today?" Ryan asked, adding that the many buildings he owns downtown would have been boarded up or demolished.

"He had a real vision for the city," Hoffman said.

"His dream was truly that Sharon would be a destination place for people to come," Ryan said. Winner's efforts toward that end included Tara — a Country Inn, in Clark; Buhl Mansion Guesthouse and Spa; The Winner women's clothing outlet store; and the former

Vocal Group Hall of Fame, a joint venture with singer Tony Butala of the Lettermen, a Sharon native.

Ryan noted that Winner never looked down on anyone and though he had chances to move his business operations, he decided to keep his headquarters in Sharon.

Ryan added the city needs people with a positive attitude and a leader to help restore its former glory.

"I think Jim Winner was one of the men that could've done that," Ryan said.

Hoffman said Winner often quietly helped city government when times were tough.

Once, Winner helped the city get a new police cruiser — something he didn't want people to know, Hoffman said.

Ryan was police chief at the time and said Winner made a hefty donation that got the city enough money to get a new car for the department when they couldn't afford it. Winner also frequently put out-of-towners up at his hotel for free when they came to Sharon for seminars, Ryan said.

Leaders could always go to Winner when they needed something and he'd "step up to the plate," Ryan said. "He tried to do everything as best as he could for the city of Sharon. He always had questions and ideas and proposals about what we could do to get the city of Sharon up and running again from where it was. I think he had a lot of ideas and some of them may have been ahead of his time. I had the greatest respect for him."