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SHENANGO VALLEY

Legend in his own time

Jim Winner's family, friends celebrate his life

By Tom Davidson
Herald Staff Writer

A "man's man" was celebrated Sunday at a large church he helped build, as more than 500 people gathered to remember the life and times of James E. Winner Jr.

Sprays of wildflowers filled the front of Grace Chapel Community Church in Hermitage and selections of music as eclectic as the man himself were sung and played in tribute to him.

A host of Shenango Valley



Contributed

Jim Winner

leaders, Winner's family and friends were joined by people from across the country and around the world to honor a man who sowed hope every-

"Wherever Jim Winner went, things improved. In a sea of negativity ... Jim Winner's presence could offer hope. I can think of no greater role model."

Curtis Sliwa,
Guardian Angels founder

where he stepped and saw to it that local children can begin the school year with new shoes. Winner was a business tycoon and philanthropist who was a local successor to the valley's best known benefactors, Frank H. Buhl.

Winner was killed in a car accident Tuesday near his

Cook's Forest cottage. He was 81. Winner's business interests included The Club, a vehicle anti-theft device; The Radisson Hotel, Shenango Township; Tara - A Country Inn, Clark; Tiffany's Banquet Center, Brookfield; and the former Winner Steel, The Winner, a women's clothing store, and Buhl Mansion Guesthouse and Spa, all in Sharon.

"When I think of my dad, the word big comes to mind," his son, James B. "Little Jim" Winner said.

In the days since his father's death, condolences have come from people Winner knew from around the world, his son said.

He noted his father's philanthropic endeavors, notably the Shoe Our Children fund Winner started because he knew what it was like to attend school without a new pair of shoes. More than 50,000 pairs of shoes have been distributed to people in Mercer County thanks to the fund, James B. Winner said.

He also remembered his father's love to shop, seeking out holiday sales at Walmart to buy white Christmas lights, which he adored, or to buy something for his wife Donna, his son said.

He loved Southern gospel music, Fourth of July parties and spending time with his

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family and friends. He enjoyed watching movies so much he built a theater at his Cook Forest cottage with a 10-foot screen and 16 recliners, James B. Winner said.

As much as he was larger than life, Jim Winner was also "larger than death," his son said.

He was an "Easter person," a man of faith who believed in resurrection who is now rejoicing as he's reunited with friends and family who've already left the earthly world.

Winner's daughter, Karen Winner Sed, said if her father were present he would welcome people to Grace Chapel, his home church and a place he was proud in which to worship.

Her father was "a creator, a leader, a man who thought outside the box," she said.

"If it weren't for him, I wouldn't be here today," she said.

Her dad mentored her in the family's business interests and taught her more than she learned in college, she said.

He encouraged her and taught her life lessons that have made her a success.

"It wasn't just about him," she said. "My dad was an encourager."

Always ready to offer a word of praise when things were going good or to comfort her in trying times, he was "always there to push you to the next level and six levels beyond that," she said.

Life with her dad was "a novel full of adventure and a great amusement park ride," she said.

His mantra was "faith not fear" and it was more than a phrase, but "something my father lived by," she said.

"Now it's time for us to live as he'd want us to live," she said.

Winner was also eulogized by Curtis Sliwa, an anti-crime activist and radio personality who founded the Guardian Angels, a group dedicated to combating urban violence and crime.

Sliwa hailed Winner as an idealist who "radiated a positive outlook like 50,000 volts of positive energy."

"It would just sort of charge you up to the max," Sliwa said.

A "man's man," Sliwa called him, impressed that Winner had created a world-class clothing store in downtown Sharon and a plantation-style luxury restaurant at Tara in Clark, in the middle of the Rust Belt.

"This man wanted to make change, to make a difference

not just in Mercer County, in Sharon, but in human lives in general," Sliwa said.

"Wherever Jim Winner went, things improved," Sliwa said. "In a sea of negativity ... Jim Winner's presence could offer hope. I can think of no greater role model."

The Rev. Larry Haynes, pastor of Grace Chapel and a long-time friend of the family spoke of Winner's faith in and commitment to the people around him.

Winner was a man who had a "simple, country faith" that "allowed him to lead a life that was magnificent," Rev. Haynes said.

While a man of his stature is irreplaceable, the pastor said he thought Winner had spent his life "planting seeds" in the people around him.

Now that he's gone, it's time for these seeds to sprout, he said.

Winner was a man of great focus, who had a fascination with everything on earth; he wasn't afraid to fail and exuded a frenzied enthusiasm that some, even his friends, thought crazy, Rev. Haynes

said.

He paid attention to people regardless of their station in life and was always ready to learn something new, Rev. Haynes said.

"He saw stuff you didn't see," Rev. Haynes said.

He was willing to try things and if he failed, "he'd just pick himself right up and do something else," Rev. Haynes said.

"Sometimes you've got to step outside the lines, color outside the picture," he said. "That's what Jim Winner did for all of us."

For 25-years, his wife Donna called him, "her boyfriend" and he was always ready to surprise her with flowers or an outfit bought at Walmart, Rev. Haynes said.

He always "lived" no matter what he was doing and the accident which took his life was emblematic of Christian teaching that "no one knows the day or the hour" when they'll die.

But for Winner, he "(didn't) need to know the day, he (didn't) need to know the hour, because he was ready, Rev. Haynes said.