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Jones recalled as Freehold booster

By Dick Metzgar

Someone reading this newspaper's "Yester-year" column a century from today will undoubtedly note an item about one of Freehold Borough's most illustrious personalities —Jeff Jones.

Jones, the owner of the Court Jester restaurant and bar on East Main Street and similar operations in Hightstown and Aberdeen, died on July 2 at the age of 52.

A visionary and imaginative promoter, Jones was one of the most effective movers and shakers in the renaissance of the town's downtown area over the last 25 years.

His flamboyance and imagination were evident even after his death.

His wake held in the Court Jester on July 5 and the funeral procession Thursday morning were unlike any other ever seen in Freehold. The procession began at the Court Jester and proceeded down South Street to St. Rose of Lima Church, led by a horse-drawn carriage bearing his body and followed by hundreds of family members, friends and acquaintances.

The horse and carriage were trucked in from Philadelphia for the occasion.

Nobody could recall ever hearing about a wake being held in a restaurant/bar in the area, or about a horse-drawn carriage being used for a funeral procession since the invention of motorized vehicles.

But that was Jeff Jones —imaginative and bigger than life, even after death. He was still doing it his way.

Nolan Higgins, manager of the Higgins Memorial Home, said he and his father, James Higgins, director and founder of the funeral business on Center Street, had been aware of Jones' wishes for his funeral arrangements when the time came.

"Jeff had been telling us for several years that this was how he wanted his wake and funeral handled," Nolan Higgins said.

Just after he opened his new restaurant in 1977, Jones, 30, was quoted in a local newspaper: "I had been looking at Freehold for years because I thought they could use another restaurant here and that it would be a nice place to open one. Many people have a tendency to think that Freehold is dead. We don't believe that, we think there is a lot of life in Freehold."

From then on, Jones would do everything within his power to help revitalize the historic town.

Jones combined with a number of other key movers and shakers for the renaissance of the downtown area and established popular institutions and events, although many others would be involved with Jones' ideas over the years.

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"Soon after he came to town and opened his bar and restaurant, which for years had been Conway's Bar, Jeff came to the Borough Council with a proposal to open an outdoor cafe," said Kane, the borough's mayor at the time. "Many of us were skeptical because we didn't think people would sit outside with car exhausts practically on top of them. We did give him permission and later he did open his outdoor cafe and, amazingly, it was very successful. And you can see now how much a part of the downtown scene revolves around its downtown cafes."

Jones and former Councilman John Ballew, a fellow downtown businessman, came to Kane, who by then was out of office, when they were organizing the Freehold Center Partnership in 1990.

"He came to me and asked me to be the first chairman of the partnership because I was familiar with the politics of the town, although I was a private citizen and did not own a business in town," Kane said.

With Jones operating behind the scenes and Kane running the fledgling organization as chairman it quickly grew, and led to the implementation of a Special Improvement District (SID) in downtown Freehold.

Jones and Ballew collaborated to help create the Freehold Center Partnership during 1989 and 1990. This was after members of the borough's Economic Development Committee had discussed forming an SID and had listened to several acknowledged experts on the topic.

Deciding that local government was not equipped to implement such a momentous proposal as an SID, Ballew and Jones engaged the services of Donald Smartt to help them get such an operation off the ground in the borough.

Smartt was a downtown management consultant who had been one of the experts addressing the Economic Development Committee on the formation of SIDs.

"Jeff and I had gotten together a dozen times to discuss forming the partnership and we hired Don Smartt to help us," Ballew recalled.

Looking back on that decision, Smartt said, "I felt they had an excellent idea and that the borough was a great town in which to operate an SID. Jeff Jones was a visionary way ahead of his time with very innovative ideas. He just needed the right people to help him implement them. The borough's SID is one of the most successful in the state and Jeff Jones was a large part of that success."

Hank Bailey, of Marlboro, points to Jones for playing a key part of the annual "Born to Run" 5-mile race in Freehold, a major charity event, since its inaugural event in 1985.

The runners have been treated to refreshments at the Court Jester every year the event has been held, Bailey said.

"Jeff was always one of our biggest backers," Bailey said. "Each year he would ask me what I needed and he would supply it. Nobody has done more for the downtown area than Jeff."

Jones was first and foremost a promoter.

"This is the last event that Jeff Jones will ever promote in Freehold," Smartt noted as Jones' funeral procession prepared to leave the Court Jester on Thursday. "And he did it his way."