



Jean Neice/Herald file

Businessman and entrepreneur James E. Winner Jr. stands at his office window overlooking the Shenango River and downtown Sharon in June 1997. His local business interests over the years ranged from boutique inns to steel processing, but he was probably best known for marketing The Club, an automotive steering-wheel lock.

MERCER COUNTY

Business icon Jim Winner dies

Crash claims entrepreneur

Herald Staff

James E. Winner Jr., a man born on a "very poor dirt farm in Transfer" who became the leading businessman in Sharon and Mercer County, was killed in a car crash Tuesday in Clarion County, state police said. He was 81.

The Rev. Larry Haynes, who worked with Winner for years at the Shenango Valley Foundation, said he was told by family members of Winner's death Tuesday evening.

"They're all in shock," Rev. Haynes said of Winner's family.

Winner's Lexus sport-utility vehicle crashed into another SUV at 4:40 p.m. Tuesday on Miola Road, Highland Township, police said. The driver and passenger of the SUV also were killed, police said.

Winner's business interests over the years have included The Club, the motor vehicle anti-theft device; The Winner women's clothing store in Sharon; the Buhl Mansion Guesthouse and Spa in Sharon; the Radisson Hotel in Shenango Township; Tara, the restaurant and inn in Clark,

where Winner lived when he was in town; and the former Winner Steel, Sharon, which he sold and is now known as Sharon Coating.

Like his idol, Sharon industrialist Frank Buhl, Winner also gave tirelessly to charitable causes. He was director emeritus of the foundation, of which Rev. Haynes is executive director.

"Jim was just a great man and did more behind the scenes than people even knew," Rev. Haynes said.

Steve Gurgovits, chief executive officer of Hermitage-based FNB Corp. called Winner a true friend.

"There aren't a lot of people I can think of who can fill his shoes," Gurgovits said. "He did everything in his power to support the community."

While Winner's name often was all over his business ventures, his philanthropic activities, such as founding the foundation's Students for Charity activities that promoted charitable giving in local schools, generally were less obvious.

Rev. Haynes called the loss of Winner "huge" for the community.

"I don't think the community even understands it," he said. See **WINNER**, page A-8

Winner

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said.

In 1997, Winner described his early years by saying, "I was raised on a very small, very poor dirt farm in Transfer."

At the age of 5 he said he had to rise at 5 a.m. to milk cows on the Pymatuning Township farm. He attended a one-room schoolhouse and graduated in a class of eight from Reynolds at age 16. He said both of his parents influenced him, but in different ways.

"My father gave me my work ethic," he said. "Nothing has ever been physically hard for me, I've done harder work on the farm," he said.

His mother influenced his morals and integrity, Winner said.

After turning 13 he saw how hard his parents worked on the farm and decided the lifestyle wasn't for him. His mother told him he needed to tell his father, which caused him to shake in fear. After getting up the nerve to tell his dad, Winner said his father said if he wanted to give up farming, that was his decision. "She was teaching me a lesson," Winner said of his mother. "Be forthright with your plans because when you are not, that causes problems," he said.

When he turned 17 he entered the U.S. Army and six months later was stationed in Korea during the Korean War. After the war he returned to the area and worked as a general laborer at the former Westinghouse Electric Corp. ransformer plant in Sharon. Attending a few years of business school, he never went to college — something he felt out him behind a few steps. "The things you learned through trial and error you earn in college," he said.

He sold the first Club in a western Pennsylvania Sears store and gradually built up a sales network that shipped 4 million clubs annually to retailers such as Walmart, Walgreens, Kmart and Target. He created Winner International Inc. on April 29, 1986, to market the club. The company was his most successful endeavor and eventually introduced a number of safety-related and other products.

The Wall Street Journal reported in 1993 Winner International's sales were expected to be more than \$100 million and in 1992 the private company earned \$35 million. By the mid-'90s Winner International sales of The Club had topped 10 million units.

He became a partner in a Cleveland chemical company



Jason Kapusta/Herald file

Jim and Donna Winner opened The Winner in 1988, filling the downtown women's fashion store with finery that includes crystal chandeliers, a grand piano and even a red convertible in the lobby — secured, of course, with The Club steering wheel lock, one of Winner's other claims to fame in the business world.

such as Designer Factory Outlet, a clothing store in Transfer.

He was an early investor in Sensormatic Electronics, an electronic anti-shoplifting system that used plastic tags placed on clothing that activate an alarm when removed from the store. A website for one of Winner's companies said he handled the initial marketing for the system.

In 1979 he bought the former Shenango Inn in Sharon from local shareholders, but after moderate success in trying to revitalize the community hotel, he sold the establishment after a few years.

What really launched the Winner empire was when he helped to develop and market a car anti-theft device called The Club in the mid-1980s.

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cluded in this group was the former Ultimate Technologies Inc. in the former Westinghouse Electric complex in Sharon.

Winner gutted the building, updated and added new machinery to create Winner Steel. The company went on to employ 300 at the plant where he continually poured money into operations to create a nationally-renowned steel processing center. He eventually sold Winner Steel which continues to operate under the name Sharon Coating LLC.

In addition, he created Winner Aviation at Youngstown-Warren Regional Airport which he also sold.

Most, if not all, of his enterprises had Winner somewhere in its name to show it was part of the family franchise.

"I know that I'm putting the responsibility on my kids and grandchildren," he once said. "Every time my name goes up on something I, and they, have the responsibility to live up to that name. I'm passionate about what I do."

Winner said he always believed he needed to give back to the area, and in 1991, he created The Winner Foundation, a non-profit organization that is a part of the Community Foundation of Eastern Ohio and Western Pennsylvania.

The foundation, which will be a lasting part of his legacy, has contributed thousands of dollars to a number of local endeavors, ranging from college scholarships to charitable needs of area schools, churches and many other agencies.

He and his family were the creators of the Shoe Our Children program, which annually donates hundreds of pairs of shoes to area school children who ordinarily wouldn't be able to afford them.

His philanthropy didn't stop there. He demanded that Winner International practice tithing, whereby 10 percent of the company's profits were turned over to charity. The Winner, the off-price fashion store he created on West State Street Sharon, donated all of its profits to charity and Winner family members donated 10 percent of their paychecks to Covenant Presbyterian

Church in Sharon.

Throughout the 1990s Winner was particularly interested in buying buildings in downtown Sharon. In 1995 he bought the former Whitmer-Smith building in downtown Sharon to go along with his other holdings such as the former Willson's Furniture store.

Church in Sharon.

Winner was one of the key benefactors in organizing the Vocal Group Hall of Fame and Museum, which opened in 1997 at the former furniture store. The museum honored doo-wop and other vocal artists of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. In a disagreement about the future of the Hall, he severed his ties with the project in 2004.

Winner said the reason he bought such a large number of downtown buildings was he wanted to give the city a boost after being decimated by industrial plant closings of the 1980s.

Further, he wanted Sharon to become a destination point for travelers.

"I envision Sharon evolving into a European city," he said. "But before that can happen, we have to give people a reason to spend one or two days in Sharon."

In 1995, Winner was awarded an honorary doctorate from Slippery Rock University.

"For a man who came from

a graduating class of eight, it's a quantum leap to receive an honorary doctorate," he said at the time.

Winner spoke said his education "primarily came from the street" and a life-long love of reading.

He promoted a more formal education in his four children.

"I wanted to save them the time it took for trial and error," he said.

Winner would often reflect on how far he came from his days on the farm as a boy. He also acknowledged that he at times stirred controversy along the way.

"The passages of life are very real," Winner once said in his late 60s. "You think differently at 20 than you do at 30, 40 and 50. My guidelines have changed. I have always done things with integrity, but it's sometimes controversial. None of us know why things come to our minds, but I've got something telling me now in my 60s the same thing that was told to St. Paul: 'To whom much is given, much is expected.'"

Winner is survived by his children, grandchildren and his wife Donna.

Herald Staff Writer Joe Pinchot and Business Editor Michael Rohnick contributed to this report.