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Jim Winner, Developer of the Club Antitheft Device, Dies at 81

By **BRUCE WEBER**

Jim Winner, a businessman who developed and marketed [the Club](#), the popular antiauto theft device, died Tuesday afternoon in an automobile accident in Clarion County in western Pennsylvania. He was 81 and lived in Hollywood, Fla., and Clark, Pa.

The Associated Press, quoting the state police, said Mr. Winner was driving a sport utility vehicle on a two-lane highway when it crossed into oncoming traffic “for unknown reasons,” colliding head-on with another vehicle. Both people in that vehicle also died.

Mr. Winner was the chairman of [Winner International](#), a company based in Sharon, Pa., that he founded in 1986 to market the Club and that now sells a variety of safety and security products.

At heart a salesman and a promoter, Mr. Winner had numerous other ventures as well, including a rural Pennsylvania restaurant and inn called Tara, inspired by the plantation in “Gone With the Wind” and offering, according to [its Web site](#), “an embodiment of the Old South.”

But it was the Club that made his fortune. A device that hooks to a car’s steering wheel and prevents it from being turned, the Club can be defeated by determined thieves (who are willing, for instance, to saw through the steering wheel), but Mr. Winner understood that it could be sold for its power as a psychological deterrent as well as an actual one. After all, why would a prospective thief try to steal a car with the Club affixed to the steering wheel if a nearby car didn’t have one?

By 1993, Mr. Winner had sold more than 10 million of them, enough for one in every 20 American cars.

“If it weren’t the Club, it would have been something else,” Mr. Winner said in an interview in *The Wall Street Journal* in March 1993. “The product is not my cause. I like to sell.”

James Earl Winner Jr., was born in July 1929 and grew up on a farm in Transfer, Pa. In a 1997 interview with the Web site [ancestry.com](#), he said he had gone to school in a one-room schoolhouse. “When I’m speaking to a group, I feel comfortable saying that no one in the room was raised poorer than me,” he said

Mr. Winner was known in Sharon as a city booster. The owner of a number of downtown buildings, he was active in trying to create a western Pennsylvania tourist industry and, as founder of a charitable foundation, supported scholarship funds, churches and schools.

A friend of 50 years, Stephen J. Gurgovits, now the chief executive of First National Bank of Pennsylvania, said in an interview Wednesday that Mr. Winner's childhood informed his philanthropy later in life.

"He told me it was a struggle for him to have shoes to wear to school," Mr. Gurgovits said. That childhood experience led Mr. Winner to create a local fund that provided shoes for children in need.

Mr. Winner never attended college. After a stint in the Army, he sold vacuum cleaners, chemicals and pianos, among other ventures.

His first marriage ended in divorce. He is survived by his wife, Donna, four children and several grandchildren.

The invention of the Club, according to the Web site of Winner International, occurred after Mr. Winner's Cadillac was stolen and he harked back to his Army days in Korea, when soldiers would secure their jeeps with chains on the steering wheels. The Wall Street Journal, however, reported that Mr. Winner was already working with a mechanic, Charles Johnson, on an antitheft device for cars when his Cadillac was taken.

Mr. Johnson later asserted in a lawsuit that he deserved credit for his role in inventing the Club. The suit was settled for an undisclosed sum.

The others killed in the crash Tuesday were identified as Bobby Jarrett, 82, of Tionesta, Pa., and Raymond Fair, 76, of Tylersburg, Pa.