

The Washington Post

James Winner dies at 81; marketed the Club steering wheel lock

Advertisement

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James Winner, who marketed the steering wheel lock known as the Club after his car was stolen in the 1980s, died Sept. 14 in a head-on collision in western Pennsylvania. He was 81.

Two other people also died when Mr. Winner's sport-utility vehicle crossed into oncoming traffic "for unknown reasons" and collided with their car, state police said. The investigation continues.

Mr. Winner sold the first Club in western Pennsylvania before creating Winner Int., a Sharon, Pa.-based company that has sold more than 10 million units. The device prevents car thieves from driving away -- and its visibility can be a powerful deterrent.

Mr. Winner was a salesman at heart. Before marketing the Club, he had sold vacuum cleaners, pianos and chemicals, and he said he was not so passionate about steering wheel locks as he was about sealing deals.

"If it weren't the Club, it would have been something else -- it could have been a door knob," he told the Wall Street Journal in 1993. "The product is not my cause. I like to sell."

Mr. Winner owned hotels, schools and businesses, including Winner Steel, which he eventually sold. He bought and restored buildings, including the downtown Sharon home once owned by industrialist Frank Buhl, which Mr. Winner converted into a bed-and-breakfast.

Mr. Winner also was widely known for his philanthropy in western Pennsylvania.

He said he wanted to make the area a tourist destination and create jobs after industry losses there.

Mr. Winner was born in Transfer, Pa., and worked on his family's farm beginning when he was 5. He attended school in a one-room schoolhouse before joining the Army at 17.

-- News wires and staff reports

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