

COMMENTARY

Downey was more than a saloon keeper



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Listening to the Phillies TV broadcast the other evening, I was shocked to hear play-by-play announcer Chris Wheeler mention that John O. "Jack" Downey, the former owner of Downey's Irish Pub in the Society Hill section of the city and a friend of mine from many years ago, had died on Aug. 12 at age 86.

Over the years, Downey's had become a popular meeting and dining place (as well as a watering hole) for political, show business, and sports celebrities or simply the local folks who wanted a tasty Irish meal or "the best cup of Irish Coffee" in the area. Regular patrons could expect to occasionally rub elbows with civic officials like Frank Rizzo, members of Philly's professional sports clubs, and even entertainment personalities like singer Frank Sinatra and band leader Harry James.

After a brief career as a Big Band singer, and a 12 1/2-year stint (1962-1974) as the vice president and general manager of WCAU radio (now WPHT), Downey founded his restaurant on St. Patrick's Day, 1976, and continued to run it until 2003 when he retired to a home in Florida.

During a brief conversation earlier this week, Wheeler reminisced about his long-time relationship with Downey and its unique beginning. "When I was a freshman at Penn State, Ed Harvey (then a WCAU radio talk-show host) told me that he was going to get me a job at the station," Wheeler remembered. "He said, 'You're going to come down from school some day and work out for the station's softball team. Because Jack Downey (then the station general manager) is a fanatic and wants to win all the time. He'll see what a good player you are, and give you a job.'

"That's exactly what happened," Wheeler remembered. "I drove down; worked out with the softball team; drove back to school, and within two days I had a summer job at WCAU radio.

"That fall I went back to school — and the following summer Downey would send the 'Traffic Alert' airplane up and fly me down to play a game," Wheeler added.

"Then he'd fly me back to school. It happened three or four times. That's how I developed my association with Jack.

"Even long after I left WCAU we stayed friends. When he opened his restaurant, I spent hours and hours there. It was in the 1970s and I was in my 30s and I was young and dating, and all the time we hung out there. All the sports people would hang out there.

"After I got on the air with the Phillies, he'd call me and tell me how proud he was of me and what I was doing. I can't begin to tell you how important it was to me. It meant the world to me that people like Jack or Ed Harvey thought I was good.

"The last time I was with Jack was about this time last year. It was the first day of the series when we swept the Mets in four straight games. We talked about how important that series was, and were hoping that we could win a few games. I remember calling him after that and saying, 'Hey Jack, you're a good luck charm.'

"Jack was a wonderful friend, and a great man. He was very loyal to me, and I thought the world of him."

Tom Brookshier, former Philadelphia Eagles all-pro defensive back and later a CBS-TV football analyst, also had fond memories of Downey. "He was the boss when I came over from football into the radio business," Brookshier recalled. "He was an honest man, and his handshake was a contract. He was real easy to

work for and get along with and he never made talent feel uneasy. He never changed — whether you saw him at 7 in the morning at breakfast or out at night socially, he was always the same.

"Everybody today says 'sports radio' started up in New York, but it didn't. Nobody seems to remember that it began right here at WCAU radio in Philly in about 1962 when Jack had us doing it. He had some pretty good talent then, too — people like Ed Harvey, Jack Whitaker and Ed McMahon. Even years later, when I would run into him at his restaurant, it was always a



John O. "Jack" Downey

high five and a warm welcome like 'Hey, we're still doing radio together.'

"Jack was definitely the best guy in the business that I ever worked for," Brookshier stressed.

In February 1969, a late-afternoon phone call to me from Downey at my Newark, N.J., office triggered one of the most hectic days in my life. At the time,

I was an advertising and promotion manager for Ballantine Beer, then a major sponsor for the Phillies whose games were broadcast on WCAU radio.

With the first spring training game scheduled to air the following afternoon, Downey was in a panic. He still had not received the new Ballantine radio commercials, which were then being produced by an agency in Hollywood, Calif.

Assuring him that I'd resolve the situation, I immediately phoned home and informed Betty (who was then 8 months pregnant) that I had to fly to Florida that evening. My next calls were to Byrum Saam, Bill Campbell and Rich Ashburn, who comprised the Phillies broadcast team at that time, requesting them to cancel whatever plans they had for the next morning and meet me in a Clearwater radio station.

On the two-hour plane flight, and later in my hotel room, I hurriedly wrote six new commercials, and the next morning with the cooperation of the announcers, we produced the six spots. The last one was recorded less than an hour before the game was to start.

Even many years later, when I would meet him in his restaurant, Downey still joked about the incident, and thanked me for helping him solve it.

He'll be missed.
Jerry Jonas' column appears in the Life Section every Sunday.

Murals: The big picture

From Page 1D

Clark knew his work on the nature center building would have to catch the eye of drivers clipping along Bath Road, so he drove past billboards to analyze their attention-getting technique.

"That's what gave me the idea to do everything large," he said.

He made a smaller-scale drawing of his design, to include the egret, red-throated hummingbird, leopard frog, lily pads and trees, with a red-bellied turtle added later by request. Clark placed the hummingbird so its beak points to the words "Silver Lake Nature Center."

The design positions the figures "for the sake of art, to move the eye around the composition, and purposefully," he said.

Though he has an advanced degree in fine arts, Clark called in help from an early influence, his high school art teacher, Fred Slopey. "I talked to Fred about the mural, to make sure I had the grid system right. 'Do I have this calculated properly?'"

"He was one of my top students — I haven't had many," said Slopey, now retired and planning a visit to study the mural in person.

The sketch, ruled with precise squares, guides Clark as he applies the design to the wall. The artist has been working on the mural a few hours or days at a time in warm weather, climbing on a ladder perched on a scaffold to paint the highest parts. "I'm not gonna rush it, and make it done by some arbitrary deadline," Clark said.

His design depicts a lake with woods on the far bank, with frog, turtle and lily pads arranged in a deep arc in the foreground and sprawling over



Clark's acrylic "Daisy Field."

Roger Clark paints the lake surrounding the endangered leopard frog while working on a mural that covers the front of the Silver Lake Nature Center. **KIM WEIMER / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER**

The section of the building being painted has long been an anonymous stretch of cinder-block architecture, on occasion mistaken by passersby for an auto-body shop or other commercial structure, according to

Clark. In reality, it houses storage, conference room and space for naturalists' demonstrations. "Most people have misunderstood what the building has been for a long time," Clark said. "Now everybody knows."

two exterior doors. Colors are mostly cool, like the woods that surround the center; while the animals are rendered naturalistically, the forest background is more stylized.

Three of the creatures chosen for the mural — the snowy egret, red-bellied turtle and leopard frog — are protected species in Pennsylvania. The animals gravitate to the lakesides and sheltered spaces in the nature center preserve, which is a remnant of the coastal plain forest.

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