
Longtime Wenonah mayor Jack Sheppard Sr. dies at 88



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Jack Cornell Sheppard Sr., 88, whose 24-year uninterrupted tenure as Wenonah's Republican mayor was one of the longest in Gloucester County history, and whose unfettered passion for his community knew no bounds, died on New Year's Day of pancreatic cancer.

Sheppard was a workhorse Wenonah and county volunteer whose persona was that of a man with consummate humility and dignity. He was Wenonah's biggest booster, contributing more than 60 years of dedicated service to help make the town a special place to live and raise a family.

"This town IS Jack Sheppard," says Vicki McCall, a close family friend. "And he was the most selfless person I knew."

Lou McCall, Vicki's husband, recalls Jack as the best friend anyone could have.

"Jack was driven by Wenonah. He valued the uniquely deep sense of community that has been built here and wanted to do everything possible to see it continue and grow.

"A few weeks ago we were sitting in the train station after setting up for the annual historical society Christmas dinner and Jack relived how he was able to secure the station from Conrail. He also told me he would like to see the carpet cleaned in the station after a future event which he knew he would not be around to see done.

"Jack never liked recognition for any of his efforts. This was always a tough thing for many of us to deal with as he was so deserving of so much thanks by so many."

"He was my mentor," says Charles "Chuck" Forsman, who was a close friend. "Everything he was involved in, he was a tower of strength. He was always forceful but polite.

I don't know how he handled all of the things he did. He was a very smart guy."

"Jack was a counselor and friend to a lot of people," says Frank Vogel, a former Wenonah educator. "He was a genuinely giving and caring man."

Born Sept. 8, 1926, in Woodbury, Jack graduated from WHS in 1943. He enlisted in the United States Navy in 1944, was deployed in the Atlantic theater of operations aboard the USS Diamondhead, and was honorably discharged in June 1946.

He attended Glassboro State College (now Rowan University) for two years before transferring to LaSalle University, where, in 1950, he graduated with a B.A. in business administration.

Jack's first major job after college was in food sales at Libby McNeil and Libby, Inc.

He then worked for Cornell & Company Steel Construction, Inc. in a variety of administrative positions before he retired in July 1993 after 43 years.

He was elected to Wenonah borough council Jan. 1, 1962, serving 28 years including the last 24 as mayor before stepping down in 1990. Some of Jack's happiest days were on the Fourth of July when he and fellow council members marched leading the homespun parade.

Jack was the first chairman of the Gloucester County Utilities Authority, serving two five-year terms, including the early years of operation.

He was a charter member of the Gloucester County Mayors Association, serving as president and treasurer.

For more than a decade, he was a member of the Tri-County Water Quality Management board. An acknowledged expert in the field, he helped create the Tri-County regional water supply group addressing critical needs in Gloucester, Camden and Burlington counties.

In Wenonah, Jack was a founding member and president of the Wenonah Swim Club, a member of the community's combined planning board, environmental commission, historical society and library board. He was a member of Holy Trinity Episcopal Church, enjoying his relationship with the congregation.

Somehow he also found time to volunteer for the United Way of Gloucester County and Arc Gloucester.

Jack was too busy to have much time for hobbies, but he did use GI Bill benefits to take flying lessons and wound up buying two single-engine planes.

"He was the ideal guy you want to be like," says Forsman, who worked with Jack on numerous projects. "I admired the guy. He was always there when I was active in something, backing me up.

"We just clicked. We were together just three weeks before he died and we talked about the future of Gloucester County."

Says Vicki McCall, "He loved to look back to the people who started Wenonah. He kept excited and motivated."

Jack is survived by his wife of 63 years, Helen Mae, the gracious First Lady of Wenonah; three sons, Jack Jr. (Alice), Joseph (Dana), and Jeffrey; and five grandchildren.

All have copies of an eight-page chronological account of his life he keyboarded on his home computer. The work was started in 2005 and concludes just a week before his passing. Included are highlights and lowlights, one of them his 2009 fall from his trusty bicycle which resulted in "many cuts, scrapes and gouges causing significant bleeding from my shoulder to my ankle on the right side."

In a Times story that was published Jan. 19, 1990, Jack's retirement as mayor was compared to Arnold Palmer giving up golf or Sinatra giving up the stage. Jack explained his love for Wenonah, which featured fielding about 5,000 phone calls from citizens in 24 years.

"As mayor of a small town, you get to be in touch with a great number of people, and you can help them," Jack said. "A mayor is different things to different people. Russ Lee told me it's time to get out when you begin to hate the phone calls. But I've enjoyed the calls.

"I'm very proud of being accessible...of being an advocate for people who feel they don't have the ability to get things done."

Jack added, "When you mix with people who are interested, it rubs off on you. I've enjoyed my years. I love this town.

"I guess I'd just like to be remembered as someone who tried to be helpful."

Amen to that.

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Just two weeks before his passing, Helen Mae Sheppard said her husband wasn't home. He was at the municipal building, showing someone "how to get something done."

That's loving your town.

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