

Former state representative, area booster Jerry Melvin has died

By Tom McLaughlin

@TomMnwfdn

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Melvin worked for U.S. Rep. Bob Sikes and was defeated in his own run for a congressional seat by Earl Hutto. He was elected to represent Okaloosa County in the state House in 1968 and served 10 years.

Jerry Melvin, radio man, marketing genius, humanitarian and one-time Dean of the Florida House of Representatives, has died.

Melvin, 90, passed away Wednesday night. His daughter, Deena Hall, said he'd been slowed considerably in his last days by heart-related issues.

He will likely best be remembered for his boundless energy and the intense enthusiasm he brought to everything he did.

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"It seemed like the older he got the more committees he joined and the harder he worked," said Tom Rice, owner of Magnolia Grill restaurant and a close friend of Melvin's for many years.

Melvin was born in Bonifay, which he always pronounced BoniFEE, in 1929 and came to Fort Walton Beach in the 1950's to work for local radio station WFWB. He headed the Playground Chamber of Commerce during that same time period and learned how to market the area on a shoestring budget, Rice recalled.

Legend has it that Melvin would drive north with a lawn chair and a bucket of sugar-white sand to recruit snowbirds to the region.

Standing still was not Jerry Melvin's style.

Hall recalled traveling as a little girl from yard sale to yard sale with her father, glad to be along for the ride because it always meant she'd get a Happy Meal for her trouble.

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Melvin's love of "other people's junk" never diminished, Hall said.

"He brought it back to us and we'd put it in a box," she said.

Melvin worked as a young man for U.S. Rep. Bob Sikes and was defeated in his own run for a congressional seat by Earl Hutto.

He was elected to represent Okaloosa County in the state House in 1968 and served 10 years. In 1994 he returned to Tallahassee after regaining his former House seat and served until he was term-limited out in 2002.

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By the time he left state government for the second time at age 72, Melvin had served a total of 18 years and gained the moniker Dean of the Florida House.

Immediately upon his return home Melvin challenged incumbent state Sen. Charlie Clary for his seat and wound up suing the Florida Republican establishment — "fat cats in their smoke-filled rooms" — for spending party dollars to help Clary in his re-election effort.

Party dollars "are supposed to be used by the party to support Republican candidates, not help one candidate win over another," he said at a press conference on the steps of the Okaloosa County Courthouse Annex in Shalimar.

Defeated in the Senate race, Melvin ran for office again in 2010, at the age of 80, seeking to fill his old state House seat following the resignation of Rep. Ray Sansom.

Upon pre-filing to run for the vacated seat, Melvin told a reporter who had the audacity to ask if age might be a concern that he had as much fire for public service as ever.

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“I’ll put my capability, my energy and my knowledge up against any 40-, 50- or 60-year-old you got,” he said.

Another local politician, and one with whom Melvin crossed swords on occasion, recalled a tremendous spirit and sincere heart.

“Jerry Melvin was a fighter, but he was a fighter of the old school,” said former state Sen. Don Gaetz.

Gaetz recalled a School Board meeting at which he and Melvin had a “very heated” debate in front of a large group of people. Afterward, Melvin approached him, put his arm around him and asked for help getting a roof put on a local cat shelter.

“He was the kind of politician who you could have a knock-down, drag-out fight with, but it was never personal, which is very different from the politicians of today,” Gaetz said. “I have very fond memories of Jerry, even though I can show you some scars.”

Melvin often boasted that he didn’t believe in political correctness, and more than once his mouth got him into trouble.

Not long before he left the House in 2002, Melvin, angered by Jewish senators “raising mortal heck” about a portion of a 1,900-page education bill he’d authored, said something he’d come to regret.

“You thought we had shot them — every one — or lined them up against the damn wall,” Melvin was quoted as saying by the Associated Press.

Melvin wound up apologizing the next day for what he’d said, but balanced the mea culpa with a scathing criticism directed at a reporter he said had misquoted him.

Melvin’s never-back-down attitude was seen as a blessing by those in Northwest Florida who he stood up to help.

Both inside the Florida Legislature and out, Melvin was a “huge advocate” for elder care.

For many years he worked alongside Ruth Lovejoy, another iconic local figure, to better the lives of older people. Lovejoy passed away May 13, 2019, at the age of 93.

“Like my mother, Jerry had a tremendous amount of energy and a great commitment to the elderly of our community,” said Kim Fraley, Lovejoy’s daughter. “It was difficult to watch his health decline over the years. He had so much energy and he was so steadfast in his support for Elder Services.”

Melvin and Lovejoy worked together in 1981 to open Twin Cities Pavilion as a sanctuary for older people, and Melvin played a role with the Okaloosa County’s Elder Care Services since then, Fraley said.

He joined the group’s governing board in 2010 and had served for the last eight years as the president of that board.

“He had a lot of savvy,” she said. “He was a very unique person.”

Fraley, who took over running Okaloosa County’s Elder Care Services following Lovejoy’s death, said Melvin and her mother — both gifted by health, energy and longevity — each brought a unique perspective to the service of the aging.

“Their concerns for the elderly in our community came from life lessons,” she said.

Melvin’s passion also ran to the treatment of animals. He supported the Panhandle Animal Welfare Society and the feline shelter Save Our Cats and Kittens, and sat on the board of the Emerald Coast Wildlife Refuge.

Okaloosa County honored Melvin in 2018 by naming an Okaloosa Island beach access the “Jerry Melvin Beachwalk.”

Honored alongside Melvin was Mike Mitchell, whose first job after retiring from the Air Force was serving as an aide to Melvin in the Florida House.

“Jerry Melvin taught me about public service,” Mitchell told those in attendance at the ceremony.

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