



Paul Thorpe, "Mr. Downtown."

August 24, 2017

City and community officials are mourning the loss of legendary Sarasota leader Paul Thorpe, affectionately known as "Mr. Downtown."

Remembered for his kindness and humility, community leaders say Thorpe never sought credit for a multitude of roles he assumed to promote the heart of the city. But it is difficult to overstate Thorpe's outsized influence on the bustling, crowded downtown the city has today.

Thorpe died Thursday morning. He was 91.

A city institution in and of himself, Thorpe earned the "Mr. Downtown" moniker for his years of work to revitalize Sarasota's Main Street area into the booming residential, shopping and entertainment district it is today.

He is credited as the father of many beloved downtown community events, including the farmers market, the New Year's Eve Pineapple Drop, the annual holiday parade, the Memorial Day parade and the July 4 fireworks celebration.

This summer a groundswell of community leaders organized to ask the city to permanently name one of its downtown parks in honor of Thorpe. The City Commission enthusiastically agreed to rename Pineapple Park, now officially Paul N. Thorpe Jr. Park, and is pursuing a slew of upgrades there after

renovating its iconic mermaid artwork and fountain this summer.

Thorpe spoke before a crowd of about 100 people at the park at a dedication ceremony in late July. Decades' worth of former city officials lined up to thank him.

"I'm amazed," Thorpe said that morning, with tears in his eyes. "I can't express how wonderful it feels to be recognized this way. I'm just grateful people let me help out with downtown."

Born and raised in Philadelphia, Thorpe moved to Sarasota in 1969 to work as a bank executive. A World War II veteran, he had enlisted at 17 and later fought in Europe, returning to study at Penn State University, whose fight song played as his park ceremony.

In the 1970s, the Main Street area floundered as growth sprawled east and small businesses faced stiff competition with new strip malls.

"I went out and bought some bowling balls and rolled 'em down Main Street," Thorpe recalled to the City Commission at a meeting early last year. "You could've rolled them all the way down the street and not hit anybody! There was no one there."

He set out to change that, working with friends and officials to try to attract new events. A few "handshake deals" launched the first farmers market and Sarasota Grand Prix boat races — both of which are such staples of downtown now that it's hard to imagine the city without them, city officials and community advocates agree.

"Over these years I'm proud to say I've had a finger in damn near every event in downtown," Thorpe said at that meeting last year.

Thorpe's work has been back in the spotlight in the past two years as current city leaders grapple with so much construction and so many events that they have struggled to support all of the activity.

This year, as Thorpe's health declined, friends and colleagues from across the years decided they and the city must honor him in person to underscore how many lives he touched, they said. The proposal to rename a park rocketed from idea to unanimous commission vote to the public unveiling with Thorpe in only a matter of weeks this summer — an issue that normally would take months to make a reality.

"From the minute I talked to (Deputy City Manager Marlon Brown) about it, it happened really quickly," said Barbara Strauss, one of Thorpe's longtime friends who helped organize the renaming. "Everybody, everybody jumped on board. There was no pushback, there was no politics; everybody in this town felt the same way. I'm just so grateful Paul was here to see all the love that people felt for him."

Thorpe was too sick to be at the City Commission meeting the night it voted to rename the park, but he watched in awe on TV, his wife JoAnn Thorpe said.

"He turned on the TV and I could tell he was a little leery about the whole thing, having been to commission meetings and asked for so many things and then just had them tabled or turned down," she said. "He was overwhelmed. He could not believe his eyes and ears when the proposal came up for a vote and every commissioner voted yes.

"He looked at me in utter shock," she continued. "He could not believe it went through so fast. It was just absolutely thrilling for him."

For a man who frequently redirected credit intended for him to the others he worked with, friends were adamant the city show him the impact of his work, they said.

"Paul is such a humble person, he never believed he deserved the credit he's getting," JoAnn Thorpe said. "He just thought he got the right people together at the right time and, lo and behold, this good stuff happened.

"He was overwhelmed when people were so joyous for renaming the park for him," she said. "It was really special he was well enough to go to that."

The cheering crowd braving that rainy Saturday morning to congratulate Thorpe is a perfect depiction of the lives he touched, said City Commissioner Jen Ahearn-Koch, who introduced the park idea to the commission.

"That's what he was so special at doing, bringing people together," Ahearn-Koch said Thursday. "'You all may not get along and agree on issues, but let's all work together and get along and make things work.' He had that charisma and that magic."

Thorpe is survived by his wife, JoAnn, five children and 11 grandchildren. Details on services were not immediately available.

"We owe so much to Paul and his vision for downtown Sarasota and his commitment to seeing downtown become a vibrant destination for families," City Manager Tom Barwin said. "His legacy as 'Mr. Downtown' can be seen every day and night with the renewed energy in downtown, whether people are shopping, getting a bite to eat or attending one of the popular magical events Paul established ... We are forever grateful for his love of Sarasota."

The funeral service will be held 11:00 am Monday morning August 28, 2017 at First Church, 104 South Pineapple Avenue, Sarasota, Florida 34236.

Interment with full military honors will be 1:30 pm Monday afternoon August 24, 2017 at Sarasota National Cemetery, 9810 State Road 72, Sarasota, Florida 34236.

Memorials may be made to First Church, Perpetual Fund, 104 South Pineapple Avenue, Sarasota, Florida 34236.

Arrangements by Toale Brothers Funeral Homes.

Tribute Wall

RC

“ Dear Joann
I just learned of Paul's passing - My heart goes out to you and your family. Paul was such a special person - I have been privileged in having you both as a dear friend God Bless you.

Rachel Cassis - September 04, 2017 at 12:00 AM

JD

“ Dear Joann and family,
Joe and I feel so privileged to have known Paul while he was at Sunnyside. It was apparent he was a man of kindness and courage in the face of adversity. Please know that we think of you daily.
Linda Koser and Joe DeFrank

Joe DeFrank - August 28, 2017 at 12:00 AM

LN

“ Dear JoAnn and Family - My sincere
condolences to you and your family. Paul was such an inspiration to so many people and was a mentor for me when I first moved to Florida in 1982. I cannot watch a parade without thinking of Paul - he will be truly missed but his spirit will live on. It was a privilege to know and work with him.



Lucy Nicandri - August 26, 2017 at 12:00 AM

BM

“ JoAnn and Family,

My sincere condolences to you and your family. I have wonderful memories of Paul during my time with The Downtown Association. I can't count the number of festivals and events Paul and I worked on together. He had more energy than everyone put together. We had fun and Paul never made it seem like we were working. I can't see fireworks without thinking of Paul. My thoughts are with you.

Bob Meyer - August 25, 2017 at 12:00 AM