

# Remembering Joe Gilchrist



CHRIS WARNER · JUNE 28, 2022



Eight billion people inhabit this planet—and you knew Joe Gilchrist! How lucky or special, can a person be? Well, if you're here today, pinch yourself—because you hit the life lottery; you were fortunate to know one of the sharpest, kindest, coolest people who ever lived—and unquestionably, one of our greatest Americans.

Your important responsibility going forward? Live a life that honors Joe's noble loving legacy and lifelong friendship with humanity. Most of all Joe wanted us to gather his lessons, and for us to be kind and to help one another. If you are boldly up for this challenge, follow with me then, as we recount for a lasting reference point, what was truly a wonderful life; one Joe always referred to as "the best he'd ever lived!"

While Joe's passing is a bitter pill for the community he inspired, it is also the normal course of human events, as none of us will make it out of paradise alive. So today, let us mourn the loss of our departed patriarch; but more important, let us celebrate his uncanny, amazing approach to life—and how it paid off—big time, for not just him, but for everyone; and how his glowing bestowal is a lasting blueprint for unlimited future human success. The magical and talented Joe Gilchrist brought us many gifts; but in retrospect, his biggest contribution was the manner in which he lived his life; his life, itself—as it was a vibrant, shining, successful example—of what can be, if we are willing to recognize and embrace the potential for complete good inside each of us.

Born April 17, 1942, in Birmingham, Joe's family moved from Troy, Alabama to Gulf Breeze when he was a boy. Later, in nearby Warrington's Navy Point Joe enjoyed boating, fishing and exploring the area's many saltwater lagoons with a small boat and motor along with his older brothers, Lane and David. Lane served as Mayor of Gulf Breeze for 30 years, taking only a dollar annually for compensation. It was David, a banker in Birmingham, who introduced Joe and me, in early 2010.

Pensacola High School afforded Joe a great education and many lifelong, friendships. Joe loved Pensacola, its history in five flags, its defense role as the cradle of Naval Aviation and of course, as a worldwide vacation destination. Joe attended Auburn, pledged SAE where he learned to be a true gentleman; taught high school in Georgia and California before returning to run a popular pool hall and music den in downtown Pensacola; and it was this experience at running a bar that helped him seal the deal with the Tampary family to purchase the Flora-Bama.

Joe Gilchrist was an average guy who knew people like no other; and that made him extraordinary. Joe's singular understanding of human psychology—that people remember how you make them feel, simplified his business and life approach. Smiling and being nice to people while offering a unique, fun opportunity was the rock solid plan; simple, yet effective...and it caught on. Who would have thought? Well, in the beginning, not many. There were even detractors.

Joe said the first year he owned the Flora-Bama he worked so hard he never took a day off. Nevertheless, after that first 365 days he decided to celebrate by going fishing. He was so tired he slept the whole day while his friends fished.

The builder of the original one-room package store and tiny lounge, Ted Tampary, was deplored in 1964, by friends and family when he opened the ramshackle, seaside haunt. "What are you gonna do, Ted?" They said. "Sell sand?" This was a regular joke as most locals saw no value in the empty beach's infertile sand, as it could yield no new potatoes, no sweet potatoes, no soybeans, no cotton.

Joe was Pensacola High buddies with Ted's sons, Bubba and Connie. Upon their Dad's passing, they and their Mom made a deal with Joe on his 36th birthday, in 1978, that forever changed the Perdido Key and Orange Beach areas, as the Flora-Bama, in Joe's concept, was born. Joe realized he made more pouring liquor than he did handing it over the counter. He signed talented pickers: Ken Lambert, Jimmy Louis and Jay

Hawkins to play...and in no time people were talking about something going down on the line...at the Flora-Bama. By golly...there was fun to be had! And it was something...something different. But was it, really?

Asking everyone to do it with him on the line, Joe's everyday commodities comprised fun: Music, laughter, libation and song, human trappings as old as time. These were no secret. Others had done it. But they had never done it quite like Joe did—and that made all the difference—the modern world had not yet seen a level of unmitigated fun, what we humans call felicity or unbridled pleasure, like they had at the Flora-Bama.

“You play the music and I'll pour the whiskey,” was Joe's only charge. It was something definitely new—and like all good things, it caught on with the quickness; and that was to be expected.

A few years ago Joe gave me a copy of the book, “The Education of Little Tree,” by Alabama author Forrest “Asa” Carter, a coming of age tale of a young boy raised like an Indian in the hollers of Tennessee by his Cherokee grandparents. A passage from this book perhaps helps to explain the Flora-Bama's magnanimous, word-of-mouth-driven success; from one patron to the next.

Here's that passage...

**“Granma said when you come on something good, first thing to do is share it with whoever you can find; that way, the good spreads out where no telling it will go. Which is right.”**

When I set out to write about Joe and the Flora-Bama, I wanted to ascertain what made the place so special—what it was that made it such a successful business enterprise and revered destination for good times, fun and frolic. It was an enigma.

The truth is that there are many factors; and most of them involve special people. However, the Flora-Bama could have only succeeded if it was cool; and it was that from the onset.

If you have read “The Adventures of Tom Sawyer” you are familiar with the scene where Tom must paint the fence. It perhaps further explains the genius of Joe's full understanding of human psychology: that people intrinsically want what they cannot, or do not have—especially if it is desirable, interesting and fun!

Here is the passage by Mark Twain.

**One Friday, Tom skipped school. He went swimming in the river, and Aunt Polly found out. That night she said, “Tom, you have to work tomorrow.”**

**Tom appeared with a brush and a can of paint. He looked at the long fence and sighed. “Why do I have to work on such a beautiful day? What will the other boys say when they see me?”**

**Ben came along. He was eating an apple.**

“Hi, Tom! Let’s go swimming.”

Tom made no answer.

“What’s the matter, Tom? Do you have to work? Ha, ha, ha! That’s too bad.”

Then Tom had a great idea. He said, “Work? What do you mean?”

“You have to paint the fence. That’s work, isn’t it?”

“Well, I don’t know, Ben. It’s interesting.”

“You must be joking. You don’t really enjoy it, do you?”

“Of course I do. How often do you get a chance to paint a fence?”

This was a new idea, and Ben began to see things differently.

“Say, Tom. Can I paint a little? It looks like fun.”

“Well... no, Ben. You’re a good friend, and I want to say yes. But Aunt Polly! This fence is important to her, and it has to look right when it’s finished.”

“I’ll be careful!”

“No, Ben. I can do it better than you.”

“No, you can’t! Please, Tom. I’ll give you half my apple!”

“But if you make a mistake —”

“I’ll be careful. You can have all my apple!”

Ben took the brush, and Tom took the apple.

Tom began to eat the apple with a smile in his heart — but not, of course, on his face.

Many other boys came by that morning. Each one paid Tom something for a chance to paint. One boy gave him a kite. Another paid with a dead mouse. Tom also got an old knife and many other wonderful objects. By noon there was no more paint. The fence looked beautiful, and Tom was rich.

When she saw the fence, Aunt Polly was surprised. She gave Tom the best apple in the kitchen.

“Life isn’t so bad after all,” Tom thought.

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Joe said it better: **Simply that, “Life is good!”**

Joe loved life and he blindly loved people; and that unbridled love came back to him. For over 40 years he demonstrated this affection by working to improve the lives of everyone living in Perdido Key and Lower Alabama and Northwest Florida. Always the benefactor, Joe gave to worthy organizations, causes and individuals, anything or anyone related to the military or its veterans. For years Joe was there each Thanksgiving and Christmas to pick up the Marines from the base and bring them to lunch at the Flora-Bama, always ensuring there was a gift bag for them. This was fun for the military members who were treated, as otherwise they would have sat alone at the base wishing they were with family and friends.

For Joe, there was joy in giving, in showing his special love, as it became his hallmark. Joe gave to many organizations and causes, like Ken Lambert’s Sunshine Ministries,

which works to help the lonely, the isolated and the forgotten, among too many other beneficiaries to mention. Charity was his hobby, Joe's practiced avocation.

It was the norm to see Joe walking around the Flora-Bama handing folds of cash to the workers, thanking them for their contributions. It was regular for him to help out someone passing through town, down on their luck, needing a place to rest. Whatever the need or situation, Joe loved people and he loved helping them, especially anyone part of the extended Flora-Bama family. If ever there was a calamity, Joe was there to help lessen the blow, to make things easier for those disaffected.

Researchers contend love was programmed into our DNA as a human survival mechanism. If that is so, then Joe's tact of being kind and nice to people was spot on—as he was doing his part to prolong the species—and, of course the good times. Joe was a maestro in human relations and it was his acute understanding of what motivates each of us—kindness and fun, that enabled him to promise and deliver with dashing regularity. For that genius, he will be remembered *sui generis*; a man truly of his own volition and class; one of a kind; a unique individual. However that is not all. Joe was much more. He was a muse.

In the course of things, as Joe and his first business partner Pat McClellan forged the brand that is today universal, the Flora-Bama became wildly popular—for everyone—and not just the patrons. Joe met Pat back in the early eighties when Pat enjoyed Sunday afternoons, like so many, at the Gulf Gate Lodge in Orange Beach. Back in those days, after Gulf Gate closed everyone headed to the Bama; and that's where Joe and Pat became friends.

The creative class—the songwriters and musicians also discovered this budding, concert oasis on the ivory shores of Perdido Key, where there was a guy who owned this venue with daily live music who understood the value of entertainment—and cared about his players.

Again, here was Joe, with another value-laden proposition—one too good to refuse. And again—it worked. The Flora-Bama became a Mecca for singer-songwriters; punctuated by the inception of the Frank Brown Songwriters' Festival in 1984, which each November showcases some of the worlds' best singer-songwriters, musicians and performers; and of course, heretofore, honoring Joe's noble, loving legacy. The Frank Brown Songwriters Festival, named after the long-time, early night watchman, is the premier festival of its kind and will continue in Joe's absence to afford the forgotten cave painters, poets and wordsmiths of our time with the love, admiration and recognition they deserve, for writing the songs that make the whole world sing!

As successful as the Flora-Bama has been, it was not without difficulties. Through the six decades it has endured fire, hurricanes, financial disasters, pandemics and somehow what Joe called, the ever-present “energy thieves!”

In 2010, Joe found himself upside down in his personal investments due to the fall of the real estate market. He needed new partners to help him weather the storm. Despite

the Flora-Bama's success, Joe's personal wealth was depleted when the many real estate deals he made were worth less than a third of what he paid. Joe was upside down—and he needed help. He needed new partners—someone to come in with cash to save the Flora-Bama, as he had placed as collateral to one of the investments the Flora-Bama parking lot.

Enter John McInnis and Cam Price with financing and a plan to save the storied seaside haunt—and the torch was firmly passed, with Joe becoming a minority partner in the deal. The Flora-Bama was saved from becoming another high-rise condo; and a new era was born. Today the Flora-Bama's brand, under John and Cam's leadership, has never been stronger—its calendar never fuller, its attendance never higher. Every day people come by the Bama to see what their friends and family have raved about for years. The quintessential gathering place for good times, good music and great people lives on—and in recent times, it provides constant harbor for the weary; those looking for an escape in what can be a maddening world.

I recall during the throes of 2020, during the lockdowns, Joe commenting, “The world has gotten so crazy a person needs to be able to go to the Flora-Bama, just to feel normal!”

John McInnis, upon announcing Joe's passing, noted that Joe is gone—but that the story he set in motion continues. The story lives on. Joe's life story ends, but the little place on the line he started—the Flora-Bama, lives on to serve us. And it will.

Joe loved all of us. This we know, as we felt it; and we will all remember that special feeling he gave us—his warm smile and endearing countenance, all of our days. May his memory be a constant source of strength for those who felt and cherished his special love—you were lucky!

Now, at the beginning, I asked you if you were up to the challenge of going forth and living a life that would honor Joe Gilchrist. So I pose the challenge to you once again, in closing, in a different, much simpler way:

How successful do you want to be in your life?

Do you want a legacy?

Do you want eternal love and respect?

**Then ask yourself how much like Joe Gilchrist do you want to be?**

Remember Joe's incredible life and, that life is inherently good...and that its principal business is having fun and being kind to one another!

Remember to live that life and share the lessons Joe taught us, with others, especially our children.

And... remember what Gramma said...

**“Granma said when you come on something good, first thing to do is share it with whoever you can find; that way, the good spreads out where no telling it will go. Which is right.”**

So, each of you here, are blessed. Revel in the neat fact that you knew the special man that was Joe Gilchrist. Go forth, and serve as a messenger for him, and for what he lived for and believed in:

Be kind to one another, have fun, remember the less fortunate, honor our military and its veterans; and most important, live your life to the fullest! Do the things that make you happy!

We will never forget you, Joe Gilchrist—or your amazing life—it was a lesson for us all!

May you rest in eternal peace with your loving Creator.

And with that—one more quote from Joe:

“I’m gonna throw myself out!”

Love you Joe Gilchrist!

## **Joseph Robert Gilchrist**

### ***PRECEDED IN DEATH BY:***

- 
- Malcolm William Gilchrist, Jr. (father)
- Marjorie Enzor Gilchrist (mother)
- Malcolm Lane Gilchrist, Sr. (brother)
- David Henry Gilchrist, Sr. (brother)

### ***SURVIVORS:***

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- Marjorie Ann Gilchrist (daughter)
- Hannah Elizabeth Kussin (granddaughter)
- Olivia Enzor Kussin (granddaughter)
- Greg Kussin (son-in-law)
- Suzanne Gilchrist (sister-in-law)
- Malcolm Lane Gilchrist, Jr. (nephew)

- Michael Enzor Gilchrist (nephew)
- David Henry Gilchrist, Jr. (nephew)
- John Michel Gilchrist (nephew)
- Richard William Gilchrist, Sr. (1st cousin)
- Malcolm Lane Gilchrist III (great nephew)
- Margaret Shirely Gilchrist (great niece)
- David Henry Gilchrist III (great nephew)
- Annie Barganier Gilchrist (great niece)
- John Michel Gilchrist, Jr. (great nephew)
- Heather Leigh Gilchrist (2nd cousin)
- Richard William Gilchrist, Jr. (2nd cousin)
- numerous cousins