

From: John Merting
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Subject: Passing of Joe Gilchrist

This week the World lost one of its all time “Characters” , to use one of his favorite terms, and a True Legend, Joe Gilchrist! Joe was the Founder and Co-Owner of the Famous and Infamous Flora Bama Beach Bar on Perdido Key just west of Pensacola and located on the Florida Alabama line.

Joe was the originator of the Interstate Mullet Toss where All Pro Oakland and Alabama Quarterback, the late” Snake” Kenny Stabler would throw the first mullet! Joe also started the Legendary Frank Brown Songwriters Festival, named to honor and recognize the Club’s long time night watchman and handyman. Joe for years invited songwriters from Nashville who wrote so many of Country’s most popular songs and the songwriters actually sang the songs that they wrote. The festival became so popular , that many other clubs and venues in L.A. (Lower Alabama) and Pensacola had to host some of these songwriters.

Joe started one of the first “Polar Bear” Swims on New Year’s Day where hundreds of folks , some in crazy costumes would dash into the then cold waters of the Gulf of Mexico - cold to Southerners, probably not so much to Yankees!

Joe’s Flora Bama was included in several novels, and at least one stand alone book, was mentioned in a number of Big Screen movies, and was even saluted in songs by Jimmy Buffett , who would pop in unannounced from his hometown of Spanish Fort, Alabama , not too far away. Kenny Chesney hosted a huge Free Concert from the beach Gulf side in front of the Flora Bama , and wrote and performed the song bearing the name of the Flora Bama! That concert was turned into an album, snapped up by the tens of thousands who fought the insane traffic on the only road to the club, a 2 lane road which runs along the Gulf. Hundreds listened to the concert from their boats anchored just offshore in the Gulf. This was Kenny’s first concert after an extended lay-off from concerts...and it was FREE!! A great number of ladies left their personally autographed under garments hanging from the rafters of the Flora Bama, another long tradition.

Joe surely had far more friends than any 100 politicians ! Anyone who ever met Joe had a friend for life. Joe never met a stranger, they were only friends Joe hadn’t met yet! Generous to a fault, which may have contributed to his personal bankruptcy and loss of most of his ownership interest in the Club. He had purchased a number of high end condos on the Gulf and would frequently invite old (and new friends) to stay in them , especially if they happened to be down on their luck.

The real estate crunch several years ago, left Joe upside down in his real estate. Joe had no enemies, except perhaps those Escambia County Building inspectors who cost Joe hundreds of thousands of dollars in additional restoration expenses and lost revenue during the extended time to rebuild and fully reopen his Club after the devastation wrought by Hurricane Ivan in 2004- Ivan the Terrible according to locals who suffered terribly from the massive storm.

After 9/11 , Joe knowing what financial peril most of the NYC hospitality industry was enduring , led numerous folks to fly to New York to spend money and show support to many of the bars, restaurants and hotels suffering there. Joe made famous their version of the Bushwacker, a frozen concoction which became even more potent with a “floater” of 151 proof rum on top!

Joe was the star of the world famous “Flat Earth Society “ which met the last Friday of every month- a diverse group of about 15 men led by The One and Only McGuire Martin , founder and owner of the McGuire’s in downtown Pensacola and Destin and Pensacola Beach’s Crabs, We Got ‘Em and Flounder’s . McGuire was the Treasurer of the World Wide Society , but he suddenly discontinued it, but the wives of its members continue as “The Mother Earth Society”. Joe and McGuire jointly hosted the wake, party , and bash at the legendary Trader Jon’s after Trader died.

This writer served without distinction in the NAS Pensacola based “ Sea Scouts “ with Joe at our age of somewhere about 14 , the next level for boys too old for Boy Scouts...we were friends for 65 years!! My wife , Linda, met Joe when as a Southern Miss recent graduate, he taught at Pensacola High School. Our older daughter Courtney was a Princess in the Fiesta of Five Flags Court of Don Tristan DeLuna , Lewis Bear, Jr. , a legend in his own right , and Joe was the Court’s Padre. Our younger daughter , Shannon , was the photographer for the local Fiesta and Mardi Gras Tribe of Mayoki, and the Group made their annual trek to the Flora Bama during Fiesta Court Week as did the entire DeLuna Court...all to be hosted by Joe! He always attended the Fiesta Grand Coronation wearing his tuxedo, which was mandated, but he was always sported his trademark low cut basketball shoes!

So our entire family has enjoyed the honor and privilege of being numbered among Joe Gilchrist’s many, many friends , starting some 65 years ago.....REST IN PEACE ,JOE.....