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## Remember When: Bob O'Connor

Bob O'Connor died on September 1<sup>st</sup> at the age of 61. Bob and I were classmates at Taylor Allerdice High School and shared a common bond; we were both big fans of his uncle Buddy O'Connor, the Hall of Fame race car driver from Greenfield.

Bob's philosophy in dealing with people may have developed when he was a young man growing up in Greenfield, PA. Bob was born December 9, 1944, to Bob Sr. and Mary Anne Dever O'Connor. His father was a truck mechanic who carried Pacific theater shrapnel in his back from World War II and died of a heart ailment in 1978. His mother kept the kind of warm, welcoming home that was a magnet for his friends and those of his one younger brother, Tim.

The family regularly spent five nights a week watching stock car races, especially those involving Bob, Sr.'s brother, Buddy O'Connor. Years later as Mayor, Bob was approached by a fan of Buddy's with an old racing program in hand. The man asked for an autograph. With an unrestrained enthusiasm rarely seen in politicians, Bob gathered everyone there for a rundown of Buddy's career.

During the early years of local dirt track racing the familiar maroon and gold No. 38 and its driver Buddy O'Connor were blazing a path to glory. Anyone who went racing during from the 1940's until the 70's realized that O'Conner was one of the most popular drivers in the Western Pennsylvania area. Dennis Joseph (Buddy) O'Connor started his racing career in 1938 on Route 51 where the Southland Shopping Center is now located. We spent countless nights traveling to tracks like Claridge, Arden Downs, Heidelberg, Mon-Duke, and South Park to watch Buddy do his magic.

Buddy won the P.R.A. Championship in 1954 and 1966. He also won the 1966 Tri-State Championship. In 1954 and 1966 he was honored by the Dapper Dan Club of Pittsburgh. Some of the other sports greats honored included boxing champions Archie Moore and Fritz Zivic. Arnold Palmer was also honored. Buddy O'Connor was inducted into the Pittsburgh Circle Track Club Hall of Fame in 1983 and the Western PA Sports Hall of Fame in 1994. Some of his racing memorabilia is on display at the H. J. Heinz Sports Museum in Pittsburgh.

Bob was very instrumental in working with the people at the Sports Museum secure state funding for portions of the project. The Western Pennsylvania Sports Museum opened November, 2004. Few cities of comparable size have had the success in sports as Pittsburgh. The Western Pennsylvania Sports Museum is located in the new wing of the Heinz History Center and shares stories about the long, rich history of sports in our region. One of the exhibits is the Pittsburgh Racing Association Champions. Photos and memorabilia from some of the participants are on display.

Several years ago Bob, Lernerville Speedway announcer Ed Schaefer, and I participated in a celebrity race at BeaveRun Motorsports Complex. Bob, shown in the photo is displaying his medal for winning the race. BeaveRun's primary uses are motorsports training, racing and vehicle and component testing for street cars, race cars, karts and motorcycles. Weekends are typically focused on high performance driving and racing events, while weekday use concentrates on street driver education, corporate programs, police training, teen driver education and product testing and evaluation.

The last time I saw Mayor O'Connor was on February 19, 2006. Bob was the Honorary Chairman of a benefit Daytona 500 Party at the Saddle Ridge Rock 'n Country Saloon in Station Square. The charities that were to benefit that day were the Petty's Victory Junction Camp and SIDS, The Sudden Infant Death Syndrome Alliance. Bob was very active in the SIDS Charity for a number of years dating back to when a family member had a child die from SIDS. The particular part of the SIDS Charities that would benefit that day was the Cribs for Kids Outreach, a program that helps provide up-to-date infant cribs to underprivileged families. He was there

with his wife Judy and son Cory doing what he always did...promoting Pittsburgh while participating in a worthwhile project to benefit SIDS.

O'Connor's public service career began in 1992. His leadership style as a member of the Council of the City of Pittsburgh earned him the reputation as a councilman who fought mis-management and waste of taxpayer dollars. Bob's skill at bringing people together and common sense approach made him the "go-to-guy" when things needed to get done.

Bob O'Connor became the 58th Mayor of the City of Pittsburgh on January 3, 2006. A true son of Pittsburgh, Bob O'Connor has succeeded in both the public and private sectors, unique among Pittsburgh's mayors. His real-life business experience and public sector skills at relationship building have worked together to create a successful leadership style that has produced results for over three decades.

Prior to entering public service, O'Connor was Vice President of Operations for Pappan Enterprises, a franchise of Marriott Corporation. He managed restaurants in Allegheny County over a successful twenty year career of putting the customer first by finding the right people to provide the right service.

Mayor, O'Connor was spearheading Pittsburgh's renewal into the 21st century.

He was a true son of Pittsburgh with a commitment to his hometown. He was an active civic leader lending his time and talents to a variety of civic, community and charitable organizations. He has served on the Board of Directors of Carnegie-Mellon University, Gateway Rehabilitation Institute, the Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) Alliance, The Caring Foundation, and Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Hall. Bob's wildly popular annual "Cookie Cruise" is as much a celebration of Pittsburgh's famed Three Rivers as it is his fellow citizens. I had the opportunity to visit with Bob during his last "Cookie Cruise" and it was a pleasure watching him meet and greet the people in attendance. He was a very popular "regular guy" that people could relate too.

It was interesting how Bob met his wife Judy. Bob was working summers at Jones & Laughlin steel mill. He spent his savings from summer work on a Corvette convertible. The Corvette impressed the younger brother of Judy Levine, a fellow Allderdice graduate whom he courted in the years after graduation. The car did not impress Judy's parents. They wanted their Jewish daughter to marry someone of the same faith. In 1964 Judy and Bob eloped to Wheeling, W.Va., where they were married. Her parents eventually warmed up to their son-in-law when they saw what a good man he was.

Bob and Judy lived in Pittsburgh's Squirrel Hill in the same house they moved into after being married forty one years ago. They have three children, Heidy Garth, the mother of their three granddaughters; Father Terry O'Connor, a Diocesan priest; and Corey, a law school graduate from Duquesne University and the varsity golf coach at Central Catholic High School.

Buddy's son Dennis, Bob's cousin, and I were regular observers of Buddy's contributions to local racing, both as a driver and a promoter. Bob inherited Buddy's ability to communicate with people and will always be remembered by his many friends, fans, and admirers. I share the grief with all the Pittsburghers. We have lost a great mayor and a good friend.