

Vandergrift man credited with starting movement that saved historic Casino Theater

Written by Administrator

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“Things like that should not be lost.”

That’s what Gene Iagnemma said nearly a decade ago, referring to the historic Owens family cemetery near his Vandergrift home.

Driven by an interest in history, Iagnemma worked to preserve not only the cemetery, but also, and most notably, the Casino Theater, which was nearly torn down instead of remaining the landmark it is today.

“He cared,” said Jane Barger, 90, who succeeded Iagnemma as the second president of the Victorian Vandergrift Museum and Historical Society, which he helped found in the late 1980s. “He lived in Vandergrift all his life. He cared about history. He did it for the love of the town. He saw great potential for it.”

Eugene F. “Gene” Iagnemma died at his Vandergrift home Tuesday, Jan. 1, 2019. He was 79.

A son of Italian immigrants, Iagnemma was born in the borough’s West Vandergrift neighborhood, where he lived his entire life.

“He was very proud of Vandergrift, its history and its heritage, and proud to be a part of it and help preserve that history and heritage,” said Sue Safranyos, 43, one of his two daughters.

Iagnemma graduated from Vandergrift High School in 1956. He went on to earn a bachelor’s degree in secondary education at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, where he met his wife, Joan, to whom he was married for 55 years. He earned a master’s in English and speech at the University of Pittsburgh.

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He taught English and journalism at Kiski Area High School for 35 years before retiring in 1996. As the sponsor of the school newspaper, he'd spend many late nights there getting the paper ready, and talked the school into getting computers for the publication, Safranyos said.

"He was dedicated to whatever he did, whether it was his family, his teaching job, the town of Vandergrift or his church," she said, referring to St. Gertrude Roman Catholic Church, where her father was a life member and served as historian, parish council member and lector.

"He was very quiet and kind of laid back, but he always had a plan," she said. "He was always looking to improve things and help his community. He was just very involved and dedicated and passionate about anything he did."

Safranyos said her father got his interest in history and trivia from his parents.

"He wanted to learn so much about everything," she said.

Barger, who now lives at Concordia Haven III in Winfield with her husband, Ken, said she and Iagnemma faced many challenges saving the Casino Theater.

"It started a wonderful movement in Vandergrift to help revitalize the town," she said.

Anthony Ferrante, 77, current president of the historical society, said Iagnemma will be honored with a plaque in the theater's lobby.

"He was very adamant in the fact that building had to be saved," Ferrante said. "There would not be a Casino Theater today if it wasn't for him. He started it. He's the one that kept telling us we had to do this. There's no doubt about it — he was the start that got everything going."

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Safranyos said she learned dedication and perseverance from her father.

“It was an uphill battle to save the Casino,” she said. “There were many helpers along the way, of course. It would have been very easy for him to not start it at all, or give up. All these years later, it is still standing. It’s a very important part of the town.

“He was very happy to be able to play a role in having that treasure for the town.”

In addition to his wife and daughter, survivors include a son, Gene Iagnemma of Vandergrift; another daughter, Linda Akins of Vandergrift; and four grandchildren.

Visitation was held Friday at the Brady-Curran Funeral Home and Cremation Services in Vandergrift. A Mass of Christian Burial was held at noon Saturday at St. Gertrude Roman Catholic Church in Vandergrift. Entombment was private at Greenwood Memorial Park in Lower Burrell.

Contributions in Iagnemma’s memory may be made to the Casino Theater, 145 Lincoln St., Vandergrift, 15690, or to St. Gertrude Roman Catholic Church.

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