

FORT MYERS FLORIDA WEEKLY™

YOUR NEWS AND ENTERTAINMENT SOURCE

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THE LIVES THEY LED

REMEMBERING NEIGHBORS WE WE LOST IN '08

BY EVAN WILLIAMS
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There were plenty of extraordinary souls who died in 2008. Some were better known than others, but eventually all will become a mere thread in the weave of history.

We chose six of them to portray in these pages.

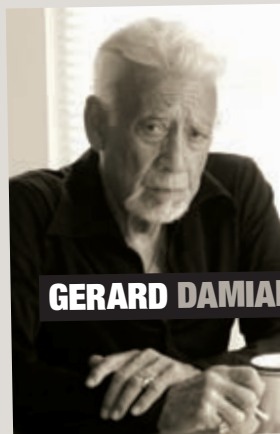
These are people you may have known as friends and neighbors — or not at all — but they are remembered here, generously, by some of the people who knew them best.

In some ways, their stories are similar: whatever recognition they received, a part of them lived quietly among a loving circle of family and friends. Many laid down their deeds and built their lives out of the limelight, like unseen masons. They raised families, sought regular work and helped those in need and near them, when they could.

SEE NEIGHBORS, A8 ▶



BRUCE GORA



GERARD DAMIANO



FRANK BIRELEY



GALE BENNETT



LECLAIR BISSELL



ALAN ARCIERI

“Whatever recognition they received, a part of them lived quietly among a loving circle of family and friends.”

INSIDE



Turtles play Trane

The Turtle Island String Quartet play John Coltrane's "A Love Supreme" at the Phil in Naples, Jan. 7 and 8. **C1** ▶



Holiday social scene

See who's out and about in Fort Myers' society. **C20 & 21** ▶



Sun power

Solar businesses are set to boom in 2009 as governments ratchet up incentives. **B1** ▶



Color your world

A home's hues can reflect your personality **D1** ▶

Emergency teams assist nurses with problem cases

Lee Memorial says program reduces cardiac arrests on floor

BY MICHELLE L. START
Florida Weekly Correspondent

When North Fort Myers resident Betty Nickel needed a blood transfusion following knee replacement surgery a few weeks back, Lee Memorial Hospital's Medical

Emergency Team was called in.

Lee Memorial Health System has the teams in place at Cape Coral Hospital, Lee Memorial Hospital, HealthPark Medical Center and at Gulf Coast Hospital, and officials say that it is reducing the number of patients that are going into cardiac arrest on the floor.

“It's made a big difference in the treatment of patients,” said Dr. Razak Dosani, a member of emergency team at Lee

Memorial and Cape Coral Hospitals.

The Medical Emergency Team is available 24 hours a day in case a floor nurse has a question or a concern about a patient.

“A nurse is taking care of multiple patients,” said Dr. Marilyn Kole, MET medical director for Lee Memorial Health System's intensive care units. She said

SEE MET, A14 ▶

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ROGER WILLIAMS A2
OPINION A4
15 MINUTES A6
ON THE MOVE B4

NETWORKING B10&11
ARTS C1
EVENTS C6&7
NANCY STETSON C8

SOCIETY C20 & 21
CUISINE C23
HOMESCAPES D1-12
REAL ESTATE E1-12

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NEIGHBORS

From page 1

To people who didn't know them, their lives are sometimes obscured by the details: the professional titles or time of death; the organizations they belonged to or lists of family members they left behind. So instead of rendering just the cold, hard facts, we focused on the stories, comments or qualities that made them human.

They are merely six of the 148,865 who depart this world in every single 24 hours on this space-born planet. But they lived in our community and were here on New Year's Day 2008. Now they're gone.



BRUCE GORA

PORTRAIT OF THE ARCHITECT AS A MUSICIAN

Even if you didn't know architect Bruce Gora, you've probably seen one of the many buildings he designed in Fort Myers. There's the parking garage in downtown he fought to paint a "salsa" color, to the shock of many old timers in the 1990s; or The Alliance for the Arts, the Fort Myers Beach Library and Temple Beth-El.

"Almost anywhere you go in this town, you can give directions by saying, turn at the Bruce Gora building," said longtime friend Hal Arkin, a real-estate agent.

Mr. Gora was also an accomplished photographer. But of his rich faculty of talents — friends often describe him as a "renaissance man" — jazz trumpet and harmonica may have been especially close to his heart.

"We had to rein him in a little bit when he came in Monday morning bleary eyed after playing a full week-end of musical gigs," said Dan McGahey, who was Mr. Gora's partner, in the Gora/McGahey architectural firm, for 22 years. "Music was really a love as much as architecture."

Mr. Gora died in December at 58, after a battle with cancer. He was especially remembered for music by former bandmate Dr. Larry Hobbs, the medical director at Southwest Florida Regional Medical Center.

"He was chairman of the Horizon Council, Chairman of Alliance for the Arts and all these different leadership accolades," said Dr. Hobbs, who met Mr. Gora at the University of Florida in 1974. Mr. Hobbs was a pre-med freshman and Mr. Gora was a fifth-year architecture student. "He always did a lot for the community, but I always knew him as a musician — and a great athlete. He was a great snow skier as

well."

Back in college, Mr. Gora was a frequent trumpet soloist for the University of Florida jazz band. Mr. Gora had also hired Dr. Hobbs to play bass guitar in a dance group outside school. In 1985, after both their career paths landed them in Fort Myers, they became two of three core members in a popular local Blues and R&B band called The Juice. It lasted for 15 years. Mr. Gora designed the cover art for The Juice's album "Plugged In," a close up of an orange with electrical cords plugged into it.

"He was a fantastic jazz musician — a fantastic one," Dr. Hobbs said. "He could play with anyone, anytime, anywhere."

Dr. Hobbs said that Mr. Gora was also a huge Florida Gators fan. If they won a game, he would incorporate the Gator's fight song into one of his Saturday night trumpet solos.

"Every moment that I played with Bruce Gora was the best moment I played with Bruce Gora," said Dr. Hobbs. "He never stopped amazing me since I started playing with him in 1972."

Mr. McGahey said that in architecture, Mr. Gora was ambitious, striving to create the very best building with each project. His ambitions were similar in music.

Mr. Gora grew up in Fort Lauderdale, where he played trumpet in bands when he was a teenager with friend Jaco Pastorius, arguably one of the best bass players in the world. He also has two brothers, one an attorney in Fort Lauderdale and the other a saxophonist who lives in Boca Raton. His wife Carolyn, an art teacher at Cypress Lake Middle School, and two daughters, Natalie Schultz and Julie, live in Fort Myers.

Mr. McGahey said watching Mr. Gora play music "was inspirational. He would completely lose himself in the music. That was when he was happiest, I think. That, and in the struggle and turmoil of architectural design."



LECLAIR BISSELL

A PIONEER IN THE SCIENCE OF ADDICTION AND CHAMPION OF ANIMALS, DEMOCRATS, WOMEN AND MORE

Dr. LeClair Bissell was "part of the fabric" of Sanibel Island for many years, friends say. She was known for her dedication to helping wounded animals with the Clinic for the Rehabilitation of Wildlife, commonly called C.R.O.W.

She is also internationally regarded for her pioneering work in alcoholism addiction treatment (she overcame the disease herself and produced groundbreaking books on the topic).

Barbara King was a social worker at the Roosevelt Hospital in New York City, where Dr. Bissell founded the Smithers Treatment and Training Center for alcohol addiction, in the early 1970s.

"It was a pioneering effort because there wasn't an inpatient alcohol treatment center in New York City at that time," said Ms. King, who has been a longtime friend and neighbor of Dr. Bissell in North Carolina. "(Alcoholism) was not widely recognized as being a disease. That's old hat now, but at the time she started the treatment program, it was a big boost."

In Lee County, Dr. Bissell was actively involved in the Democratic Party, and often voiced her political opinions in the daily paper. She was involved with Zonta; Chihuahua Rescue; Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays; the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Coalition; and Planned Parenthood.

"She never stopped," said friend Ann Heckes, who met Dr. Bissell through the Unitarian Universalist Church in Fort Myers. "There was always a cause. There were always things to be done. There was always a way to make the world better. She was a truly incredible person."

Dr. Bissell grew up an "Army brat," the daughter of Maj. Gen. Clayton Bissell, who commanded all American Air



Dr. Bissell was dedicated to helping wounded animals at C.R.O.W. on Sanibel.

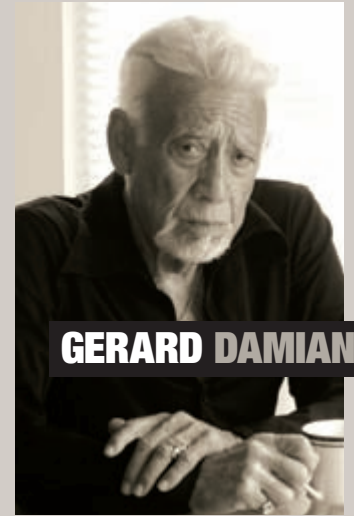
Forces in India, Burma and China in World War II. Men like Gen. George Patton and Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower were also a part of her childhood.

"Ike Eisenhower gave her horseback riding lessons when she was a girl," friend Barbara Joy Cooley of Sanibel said.

Just a few months before Dr. Bissell died of cancer in August at the age of 80, she was rescuing injured birds near her home on Sanibel Island for C.R.O.W. She had worked for the wildlife rehab agency for nearly three decades. After Dr. Bissell and her life partner of 48 years, Nancy Palmer, had moved to the island in the late 1960s, they helped found C.R.O.W.'s Volunteer Emergency Rescue and Transport system.

"It enabled us to reach far beyond what we had been able to service before," said Dr. P.J. Deitschel, the clinic director. "People think of C.R.O.W. as Sanibel but we service all of Lee County."

"One of my last memories of LeClair was she had just gotten out the hospital and we asked her if she could rescue a white pelican, which is a very large bird. And she went in her kayak to pick it up — she had just gotten out the hospital the day before. That was a few months before she died."



GERARD DAMIANO

A FILMMAKER WHO SHOOK AMERICAN'S SEXUAL MORES

When Gerard Damiano released his film "Deep Throat" in 1972, he didn't know it would shake sexual conventions across America and help change the way everyone viewed and talked about sex. The film was famous for its humorous depiction of oral sex and coinage of the popular term, as well as being the first well-known "pornographic" movie with a story line.

Still, it was one of Mr. Damiano's early, less mature works, said his son Gerard Damiano Jr. who lived with his father in Fort Myers for the last five years of his life. Mr. Damiano died of a stroke in October at age 80.

"He's been asked many times, 'Did you set out to change the world when you made 'Deep Throat?'" Mr. Damiano, Jr. said. "And of course he didn't. They were just trying to make the best film they could make with very little money..."

"He would never tell you that 'Deep Throat' was a good film, but it was funny, it was quirky and it was the right place at the right time. It presented sex and sexuality in a way that was funny, so people were able to talk about something that was taboo."

Based on a 1973 *New York Times* interview with Mr. Damiano about "Deep Throat," the term "porno sheik" became popular. Husbands and wives in middle America went to see the film on legitimate dates. Jacqueline Onassis Kennedy went to see it in New York.

The term "Deep Throat" was even the cover name for W. Mark Felt, a former second-in-command at the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and a secret source for *The Washington Post* during the Watergate scandal. (He also died this year).

"It transcended just a porno film and became a part of pop culture," Mr. Damiano Jr. said.

As the country struggled with the line between pornography and art in the 1970s, Mr. Damiano made frequent appearances in court. In each new state his movie appeared in, it seemed, there was another courtroom waiting to debate that fine line.

"My dad used to say, 'If I like it, it's art. If you like it, it's pornography,'" Mr. Damiano said. "The truth is, it's very subjective."

Mr. Damiano "did consider himself an artist, above all," his son said.

He made other films like the early "Changes" (1969-70), a documentary about the sexual revolution; and, possibly his masterpiece, "The Devil in Miss Jones" (1973). It was a film about suicide, purgatory and hell, which was compared thematically to Jean-Paul Sartre's "No Exit."

Gerardo Rocco Damiano was born in 1928 in New York City and grew up during the Great Depression. He

worked as a shoeshine boy in Times Square and a busboy at hotels in the Catskills during the summer.

He joined the Navy when he was 17, at the tail end of World War II. Later, he was an X-ray technician at Jamaica Bay Hospital in Queens, before attending beauty school. He managed a successful salon in Queens.

He was married three times, each ending in divorce. But his second to Barbara Walton, produced his son and a daughter, Charstar, who also lives in Fort Myers.

In his later years, he moved to California, and continued to pursue filmmaking, but lived in a trailer park. Although "Deep Throat" had grossed more than \$600 million, according to Entertainment Weekly, Mr. Damiano didn't see any of the profits.



COURTESY PHOTO

Director Gerard Damiano Sr. on the Set of "The Story of Joanna" at the Woolworth Mansion, 1975.

"Some people think that he was rich, but they don't know that the producers kept all the money," Mr. Damiano said. "He had some unscrupulous business partners at every turn."

(It's widely believed that associates of the Colombo crime family put up the original \$25,000 to make "Deep Throat.") In 2003, Mr. Damiano moved to Fort Myers, living mostly off Social Security.

But things improved at the end. There was a documentary made in 2005 about the enduring cultural significance of Mr. Damiano's most famous movie, called "Inside Deep Throat." And he enjoyed a quiet social life in Fort Myers, attending theater and art openings and supporting the local arts community.

"He didn't die a wealthy man, but he continued to make films," Mr. Damiano Jr. said. "He wanted to be a filmmaker; that was his dream."



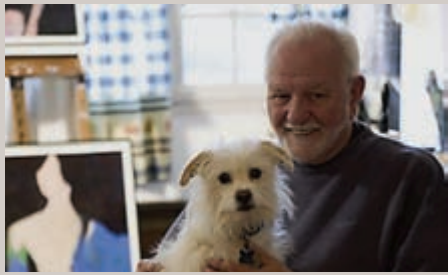
GALE BENNETT

FORT MYERS' OWN CELEBRATED ARTIST, TEACHER

Gale Bennett was an impressionist painter, teacher, graphic artist and music critic who always returned to Fort Myers, although his influence as a teacher and artist was international.

For his ad agency in the 1970s, he designed the menu still used at one of his favorite restaurants, The Veranda.

In 1996, Mr. Bennett opened a school



COURTESY PHOTO

Gale Bennett and his dog Sasha.

called ArtStudy in Giverny, France. There, he took students to paint in Claude Monet's garden.

Mr. Bennett died Easter Sunday in Cape Coral after a stroke, but he had battled illness for some time. He was 68 years old. Even while suffering from brain tumors the last year of his life, his wife Cello Bennett said, he produced more than 30 paintings, which was close to his yearly average.

Mrs. Bennett met her husband seven years ago when they spoke on the phone about a classical music critique he wrote for *The News-Press*.

They celebrated a fifth wedding anniversary the Friday before he died.

"He was my fourth husband," Ms. Bennett said. "I was his sixth wife... I always used to tease him because I would say 'there's a street named in Fort Myers for each of your wives; that's why you can't move away from this area.'"

But it also might have been because of his strong ties to Fort Myers. Mr. Bennett graduated from Fort Myers High School and his mother ran a beauty salon downtown. He played with Barbara B. Mann's children as a boy, and worked at Sydney Davis' men's clothing store in Fort Myers.

"He was really from here," Ms. Bennett said. "We think of Barbara Mann and Berne Davis as the grand dames, but they knew him when he was a little kid. I'm sure when they looked at him with his white hair, and getting ill, they could still see him as a boy."

The first time he left Fort Myers as a teenager, Mr. Bennett hitchhiked to Nebraska with a friend, to seek out a girl his friend was in love with. They came back when he decided he didn't love her after all. Not long after, he left for The School of Visual Arts in New York City.

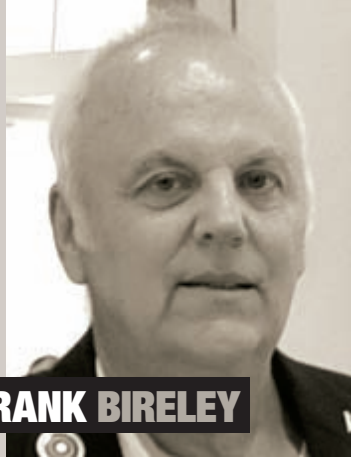
"To me what was so interesting about Gale is, right at the moment when his shows were at galleries in New York and some of his works were chosen to be in the collection at the Museum of Modern art, he came back to Florida," Ms. Bennett said. "He said he missed the nature so much. Central Park just didn't do it."

He also became an art teacher, privately and in various Lee County institutions like The Alliance for the Arts. He is remembered by students as having a generous heart.

"So many thousands of students have taken his classes," said Sanibel resident Sheila Hoen, Mr. Bennett's student since 2001. "I think he loved teaching — loved it. And people loved him for that. He made everyone feel, and do, their very best work."

David Robinson, the former president of Edison College, was an art student of Mr. Bennett's for 15 years after he retired from Edison. Now he said he's teaching his 10 grandchildren some of the things he learned.

"He said all you have to do is look at nature to get your structure, your form, your color," Mr. Robinson said. "... I can honestly say when I began taking painting from him it's like having cataracts lifted from your eyes."



FRANK BIRELEY

A PHILANTHROPIC LEADER IN LEE COUNTY

Frank Bireley had been an unrelenting patron of the arts, health care and education in Southwest Florida, both financially and as a volunteer, since he retired here in 1987.

"He was such an amazing patron of the arts," said Andrew Kurtz, director of the Southwest Florida Symphony. "He touched a lot of lives in the community and his philanthropy was for cancer and the medical community, but I don't think there was an arts organization that he did not support."

Mr. Bireley died in August after a lengthy battle with cancer. He was 71.

Long before he came to the Sunshine State, Mr. Bireley grew up on a street near where Frank Sinatra lived in North Hollywood, Calif.

His father was the creator of Bireley's Orange Drink. The elder Mr. Bireley later developed machines used to squeeze orange juice that were leased to growers in California and Florida. They were a wealthy, but low-key family, said Betty Bireley, Frank's wife of 50 years.

She remembered that Frank's father "was polished, like British proper — any female walked in and he stood and acknowledged her."



COURTESY PHOTO

Air Force Sgt. Frank Bireley.

Her husband, she said, was easier going by nature.

After high school, Mr. Bireley served four years in the Air Force where he received a commendation medal for meritorious performance. He met his future wife at Hamilton Air Force Base near San Francisco, where they both worked programming computers. They liked to go to the movies in Mr. Bireley's Cadillac and listen to comedian Jack Benny on the radio.

"We'd go to Coconut Grove, the Hollywood Bowl, the Palladium," Ms. Bireley said. "They were swish places where all the movie stars went."

Mr. Bireley graduated from California State University, San Francisco, and spent his career with IBM. He retired to Fort Myers in 1987 and began a new career in philanthropy.

He has left what Lee Memorial Health System CEO Jim Nathan called "a legacy of love."

Mr. Bireley helped causes such as Habitat for Humanity, The Children's Hospital of Southwest Florida, Lee Cancer Care, The United Way, The Music Foundation, Abuse Counseling and Treatment Center, Kiwanis Club, Barbara's Friends and many more.

He was one of the driving forces behind the new Regional Cancer Center to open this October, where the coffee shop will be named after him.

"It was kind of appropriate because Frank liked to eat," Ms. Bireley said. "He liked good food."

She added, "I don't think there's anything Frank didn't like."



ALAN ARCIERI

A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Alan Arcieri was a psychic and spiritual medium who suffered from muscular dystrophy. Even in the last five years of his life he continued to summon those who, like him, had "crossed over."

Mr. Arcieri, 56, died in December at his Cape Coral home of complications from muscular dystrophy and diabetes.

Despite his illness, he had continued hosting a Friday morning psychic talk show on 105.5 the Beat, a job he held for nearly a decade. He also wrote a book called "Earth School 101," which addresses the mystery of existence.

"That's really his legacy," said his wife, Diana Arcieri, 59.

She met him 28 years ago when he was a car salesman on Long Island, N.Y. As Mr. Arcieri began to embrace his psychic abilities more fully, she said, they would help coma patients at hospitals on Long Island by speaking with them telepathically.

"He would communicate through the EKG," Ms. Arcieri said.

After they moved to Florida 24 years ago, the Arcieris were representatives for clients in the wholesale clothing industry, to make ends meet. But Mr. Arcieri was eventually able to support the family, which included his stepdaughter Alicia Merlob, through his psychic readings and "galleries," in which he performed for larger groups.

Ms. Merlob became his caretaker and assistant in the last year of his life. She had moved out of the house as a teenager but developed a newfound respect for her step-father's work.

"I really got to know who he was," she said. "We would talk about everything from soup to nuts. And sometimes we would have opposing views. But it was great because we challenged each other. And I think that was the best part of my relationship with him. I think he met his match when he met me. I think that's what fueled our relationship, that expanding, that constant push to learn more."

"I developed a tremendous amount of respect for what he did as a profession. The fact of the sheer volume of lives he helped changed."

Clients would come to his home office and "when I would escort them out I could see they were visibly changed," she said.

Brenda de Sousa, a Fort Myers psychic and friend of Mr. Arcieri's, said, "He would show people a whole world of comfort that they really didn't know existed." ■



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INSIDE



Lettuce ware legacy

Dodie Thayer descended from Jupiter pioneers and created pottery collected by first ladies and queens. **C1** ▶



Networking

The Colonnade of Estero hosts luncheon for residents-to-be. **A35** ▶



Business

When Nissan is on its back, it's often the time the company does its best work. **A30** ▶



Real estate

Waterfront luxury in Cape Coral. **B1** ▶

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THEY LIVES THEY LIVES

A look back at some we lost this year

By Evan Williams

The four tributes in this annual edition of Florida Weekly suggest the way these people, these loved ones, known and unknown, stay with us after they have died. One danced in Harlem and then across the world stage. Another drifted in to homelessness.

SEE LIVES, A12 ▶



How high will Florida's population go?

BY JIM TURNER

The News Service of Florida

With three months until "Census Day," Florida has an outside chance to do better than previously analyzed.

With 21.48 million Floridians estimated by the U.S. Census Bureau, the Sunshine State is already expected to see an increase in federal funding and political clout in the coming years because of its growing population. Florida jumped New York several years ago to become the third most-populous state and appears safely in line to see its U.S. House delegation get bumped from 27 members to 29 members after the 2020 Census.

SEE POPULATION, A4 ▶



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LIVES

From page 1

But all were cared about and loved, all have a story to tell and they were our friends and neighbors in Southwest Florida. In these pages we bring them along with us in to a new decade, the lives they led still very much a part of the ones we are compelled to go on living, now and hopefully for a long time to come.

“we are so both and one/ful/ night cannot be so sky/ sky cannot be so sunful/ i am through you so i”

— e.e. cummings

“Now that you are gone, you are everywhere”

— J.D. McClatchy



Martha Graves Gibson

January 4, 1931 – October 2, 2019

A News-Press proofreader in the days of hot type and a Lee County school bus driver, Martha Gibson was also the matriarch of a family of nine children, and embraced an ever widening circle of relatives, friends and co-workers with an enduring energy and spirit of generosity that seemed to know no bounds.

The crowded, bustling house where they lived on Braman Avenue in Fort Myers was a three bedroom with a converted garage as a fourth and a Florida room. The boys had the garage with bunk beds while the girls took up two other rooms. The youngest had a crib in the parents' room.

In 1961, Ms. Gibson began working at the News-Press when the pages were printed with a Linotype hot metal typesetting machine, run by her husband Romulus “Hoot” Gibson. The News-Press at the time was in the process of moving its headquarters from the old Collier Arcade to its location up until this year, a few block away on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard. In 1971, Gannett corporation bought the paper. She continued to work there for 32 years, proofing stories and ads.

Her contribution went beyond that, however.

Pat Varn was a 20-something year old News-Press city reporter in the late 1960s, banging out stories on deadline, as she recalls, which her editor would sometimes rip right off her typewriter. Her husband, Richard Varn, said he also worked there as a printer and later a purchasing agent.

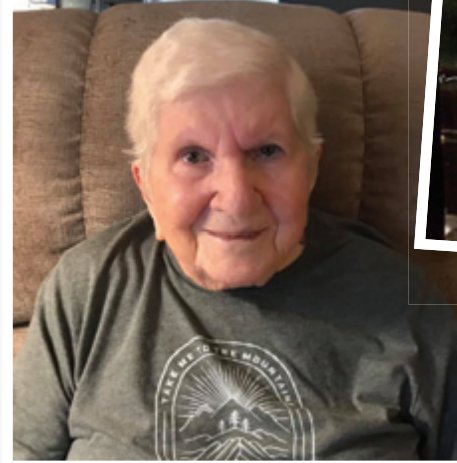
The daily deadlines of the newspaper business often produced a high-tension atmosphere in which Mr. Varn says Ms. Gibson was “a point of harmony.”

“She was always calm about it,” he said. “And if they needed someone to hang around a little longer, a late coming story or something, Martha was always there to take care of that too. She and her husband, they were sort of the bedrock of the newspaper when we were there... Yeah, she was a sweetheart.”

Ms. Varn and her mother, who was also a close friend, both knew they could confide in Ms. Gibson.

“She was a good listener as well as a friend,” Ms. Varn said. “She also was I would say very wise. Of course, raising nine children, she had had a lot of experience with young people coming up. She came and she talked with my mother when I was going through difficult times as a teenager.”

Ken Picking was a 21-year-old sportswriter when he moved to Fort Myers from Ohio to work at the News-Press in the 1970s, then a “destination for young journalists starting their careers,” Mr. Picking



COURTESY PHOTOS

Martha Gibson worked as a proofreader at the News-Press and a Lee County bus driver, pictured above with other family photos from her life, including later in life at the beach and as a young newlywed with her husband Romulus “Hoot” Gibson.

wrote in an email. “Quickly I discovered the Back Shop Couple of Hoot and Martha Gibson embraced us all as extended family and were always there for information, advice and hugs if needed.

“Martha’s warmth and willingness to help all us Wild, Ambitious Transplants established her as the Matriarch of the News-Press. The Gibsons, many of whom worked in various capacities at the N-P, created the Family Atmosphere that remains embedded in the hearts of all of us who were fortunate enough to be part of that Golden Era of our beloved News-Press.”

Many members of the Gibson family ended up working at the News-Press in different capacities. For people there and others who knew her, Ms. Gibson was like a “second mother.”

“She will always be my Florida Momma & was truly generous of spirit,” wrote Ms. Gibson’s niece in Indiana, Shirley Knecht. “Aunt Martha had a soothing voice, contagious laugh & during very long conversations helped me walk through difficult times & celebrate joys with her insight & honesty.”

Ms. Gibson started at the paper working days and then moved to nights, getting home around 2 a.m. The next day she would get up early to drive a school bus, a job she held for 20 years. Her husband drove one, too. For a while she also held a third part-time job on the weekends for an answering service.

“Between her jobs she probably did five or six loads of laundry a day that we had to fold and put up,” said her daughter,

Ruth Mahn. “That was one of our chores along with doing the dishes at night. And there was many a time we would leave our homework for her to review when she got home from the News-Press at night.”

Neighborhood kids often came over to play, sometimes on their trampoline or in the school buses parked by the house. When she had a chance to go on vacation, the family visited a cottage near Fort Myers Beach. Ms. Gibson also enjoyed cooking almost as much as she liked sharing the food with family or friends. Her noted recipes include chocolate cake, chocolate chip cookies, macaroni salad, banana bread, chili and fried chicken.

“She was the most loving and caring mother in the whole wide world and she is truly missed,” wrote her daughter Martha Whitten.

Martha Graves Gibson grew up on Lebanon Avenue in Campbellsville, Ky., near where she was born. The home is now a bed and breakfast, but then it was home to Ms. Gibson, her parents Leslie and Blanche Graves, and two much older siblings. Her father had a wholesale business while her mother was a homemaker.

“She was quite spoiled is what she always says,” her daughter Ms. Mahn said. “Apparently her parents were well to do so with her being younger she was just very spoiled and well taken care of.”

Her soon-to-be husband, Hoot, lived around the corner. Three years older, he was a basketball player and worked at a soda shop, where Ms. Gibson would sometimes visit, riding her pet pony into downtown.

At home, Ms. Gibson would sit on the porch and knew Hoot was on his way over because he’d be whistling from down the block.

“She said she was so excited when she heard that whistle,” her daughter Mary Sharp said.

One night the couple told their parents they were going to a football game. Instead, along with another couple, they took her father’s car and eloped to Georgia. They returned home not only married but having scratched up the car on a narrow bridge. But her parents soon forgave her. A year later the couple had their first child.

Ms. Gibson never graduated from high school but in 1984, after all nine of her children had graduated from Fort Myers High, earned a GED.

Mr. Gibson ran a printing business in Kentucky, but his business partner turned out to be unscrupulous, the family says. And since Ms. Gibson’s parents also were no longer living, they headed for Fort Myers where he found a job as a Linotype operator at the News-Press.

They arrived in town on Halloween, Oct. 31, 1959, staying at the Dean Hotel downtown before finding their home and surprising the neighbors as one kid after another after another (seven at the time), as well as a dog, came piling out of their station wagon.

The family had its struggles. In 1991, two years before she retired from the News-Press, she lost her husband. She was also preceded in death by three of her sons, Robert, John and Tom Gibson. She is survived by her son Joseph and daughters Susan Stone, Martha Whitten, Mary Sharp, Ruth Mahn, and Jane Lloyd.

In a card to her daughter Mary Sharp she once wrote, “Somehow we survive between joy, pain, happy and sad. I guess this is what we call life.”

Ms. Gibson remained as much a part of her family’s life as ever, the center of their life, and helped raise her grandchildren.

A member of Wesley Memorial United Methodist Church, Ms. Gibson had a habit of praying each night for any member of her family or friends who needed it.

“We used to tease that God would go, ‘It’s Martha again I better get a cup of coffee,’” her daughter said. “Now we tease that she’s up there in heaven with her Steno pad going over the list.”

She loved to read, especially Lee Child’s

Jack Reacher novels, James Patterson, Randy Wayne White, and the newspaper. But by the 2000s her eyesight was starting to fail due to macular degeneration and eventually she would become blind, able to see only light and shapes.

Politically, she was a Democrat, though kept the peace with family members who were Republican.

If she didn't agree, she was respectful about it, her granddaughter said.

During her later years she moved in with her daughter in Fort Myers, and in her final months lived with another daughter in St. Augustine. She died there surrounded by family from symptoms linked to Parkinson's disease, though doctors differed on her diagnosis.

"One of the things I miss is her hands," said her daughter Ms. Mahn. "She had the softest, warmest hands."

Gloria Seaman Allen

June 21, 1938 – November 16, 2019

Gloria Allen's careful study of young women's production of textiles in and around the Chesapeake Bay region during the 19th and 20th centuries shed light on a little known facet of early American life.

From her dissertation on enslaved women who produced cloth on plantations to her meticulously researched books about young women who stitched intricate needlework called "samplers," Ms. Allen's work makes her one of the nation's premier textile historians, writing and lecturing about their creation extensively.

She lived in Bonita Springs later in her life and died in Naples in November not long after publishing her final work.

"Anyone with a scholarly interest in needlework, and especially samplers, is grateful for her careful research, detailed explanations, and logical conclusions about textiles," wrote Cindy Steinhoff, a sampler expert and collector, and director of the Anne Arundel Community College library in Maryland who worked closely with Ms. Allen on several projects.

Ms. Allen's most significant contribution to the field are four publications which address samplers and the girls who created them in Maryland, the District of Columbia, a small part of northern Virginia, and Delaware beginning with "A Maryland Sampling" published in 2007. It was followed by "Columbia's Daughters" and "Wrought With Careful Hand."

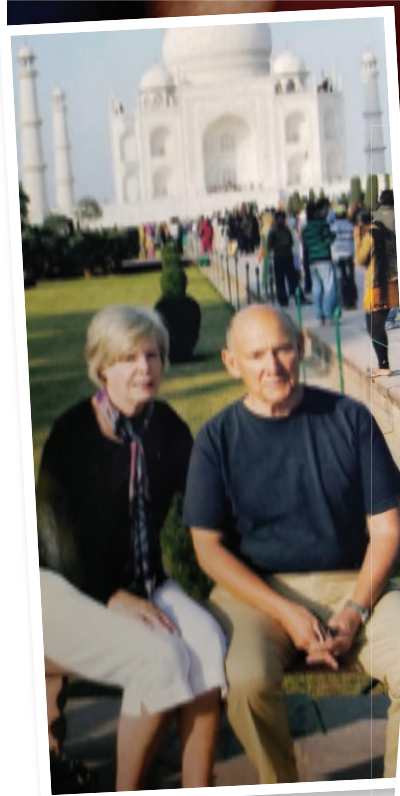
The last of the four, "Delaware Discoveries: Girlhood Embroidery, 1750-1850," was co-authored by Ms. Steinhoff as Ms. Allen's health was failing and published in 2019. It proved a success, disproving the common wisdom that there were not many samplers produced in Delaware, Ms. Steinhoff said. About 250 samplers from the area are addressed in the book.

Once they discovered similar samplers produced in one area, they were often able to track down a school or teacher in the area. It was common for girls often age 5 to 16 or older from families of means at the time to be taught the skill, using silk, cotton and sometimes wool, giving them sewing skills they might use later in life as well as produce ornate, purely decorative works.

To track down the samplers, Ms. Allen approached museums and historical societies across Delaware, holding "ID days" to encourage local people with samplers in private collections to come forward.

"We were thrilled when we could confirm the family history of a particular sampler maker and learn those details about her life that made us feel as though we knew her and her family," Ms. Steinhoff wrote. "Learning of a school that taught needlework or a previously unknown needlework teacher brought us joy."

Gloria Seaman Allen was born June 21, 1938, in Cleveland, Ohio, and the family lived in the suburb of Lakewood. Her



COURTESY PHOTOS
Gloria Allen with her family during the years that she lived in Bonita Springs, where she completed some of her best known work on 19th and 20th century textile production.



father Clarence Seaman ran a type metal company and was an avid outdoorsman. The family spent time each summer at Lake Temagami in northern Ontario, which remained a destination throughout her life.

Her mother Frances died when Ms. Allen was young. She had an older sister and a brother who died as a child before Ms. Allen was born.

She graduated from Smith College in Massachusetts before earning her M.A. and Ph.D. in American Studies from George Washington University.

She married Charles Allen, a graduate of Yale University and Harvard Law, in 1965. They lived in a small apartment on the upper east side of New York City in the mid 1960s while he worked as a lawyer for a Wall Street firm.

With three sons and looking for more room for their family, they moved to a Washington suburb and later to a home in Bethesda, Maryland.

Ms. Allen loved animals, especially cats. "Usually on average growing up we had at least 5 cats," said her son, Ted Allen. "And for many years they were all Siamese cats, so she was very fond of them."

The cats all had S names: Samantha, Sebastian, Saki, Shadow and Shale among them.

With her artistic sensibility, Ms. Allen

er, her family, and her environment," Ms. Steinhoff said.

■ ■ ■

Norma Adele Miller

December 2, 1919 – May 5, 2019

Norma Miller was born in to the Harlem Renaissance, the thriving 1920s black culture of the neighborhood located in uptown Manhattan in New York City. A precocious dancer and later a comedian, singer and writer, as a girl she could see the famous Savoy Ballroom, which took up a full city block, from the back window of the apartment where she lived with her mother and sister.

At the Savoy, a new swinging dance was just being born even if it had yet to be named the Lindy Hop, of which Ms. Miller became a leading practitioner as it swept the world. Dressed in her Easter Sunday best in 1932, at age 12, Norma was dancing outside her home on the sidewalk when the noted swing dancer Twist Mouth George Galloway, who appreciated her moves, whisked her inside to dance.

"It was the greatest night in the world and I had nobody to share it with, I was scared to tell my mother," said Ms. Miller this year at age 99, in an unreleased two-hour long interview filmed in Fort Myers by John Biffar, a long-time family friend who made the 2006 documentary about her life, "Queen of Swing."

His interview with Ms. Miller opens with him asking her how she feels at age 99.

"I feel old as hell," she tells him, wearing big black sunglasses, her long fingernails painted bright pink and holding a mimosa, her favorite drink. "I'm not afraid of it."

As she talks, Ms. Miller reveals how tough, opinionated and gloriously profane she could sometimes be. She was a "walking history book" as one friend called her, recounting in her gravelly voice her life as an independent performing artist.

She talked about her friendships with people like Sammy Davis Jr. (who she considers the greatest entertainer of all time) Louis Armstrong (who once told her, "Don't cry about a show closing, there's always going to be another one"), Ella Fitzgerald, Richard Pryor, Debbie Allen, and many others legends of stage and screen.

It all started at the Savoy, which opened in 1926 and closed in 1958.

The first generation of swing dancers who kicked off the Jazz Age there in the '20s soon gave way to a group of teenagers of which Ms. Miller was considered one of the best dancers along with Frankie Manning and others. Ms. Miller is the last surviving member of the group. They made up wild high-flying moves, "air steps" inspired by their older counterparts such as flipping their dance partners over their back.

"(They) risked their bodies and lives making up dozens of crazy air-steps," wrote Bobby White, a swing dance instructor, on his blog, *Swungover*.

The Savoy attracted people from all over the city and beyond who wanted to see the dancing or take part in it. The Lindy Hop named for aviator Charles Lindbergh was becoming a craze with a daring new generation of teenage dancers.

"Everybody wanted to learn how to do the swing dance but we had no classes, no teachers," Ms. Miller said. "You learned because you came into the ballroom and saw what they (the first generation of Lindy Hop dancers) did and that's what you did. That's how it started."

The Savoy had a "no discrimination" policy unlike most other clubs at the time.

"White dancers came there to dance," she said. "Black dancers came there to dance. There was never an issue about

SEE LIVES, A14 ►

admired artists including Picasso and the American sculptor and printmaker Leonard Baskin. Socially, she could be reserved.

"She was not that outgoing meeting somebody she didn't really know that well or meeting for the first time," her son Mr. Allen said. "She obviously was much warmer when you got to know her. She was not somebody who really was that talkative."

Ms. Allen found work as an interior designer before serving as curator and then director of Daughters of the American Revolution Museum in Washington, DC, which as a collection of historic textiles. She began to publish magazine articles as well as her first book on quilt-making.

In 1996, her husband died suddenly of a heart attack. It was a difficult time, but several years later she started to regain her footing after reconnecting with an old friend, Vincent Hovanec. He remained her companion until her death, though they never married. Mr. Hovanec died this year just five days after Ms. Allen.

Her careful work delving into the little known lives of young women remains a unique contribution to American history.

"I liked the emphasis that Gloria placed on thoroughly researching samplers to learn as much as possible about the stitch-

LIVES

From page 13

that. And side by side that's what we did."

After Ms. Miller was part of a winning dance contest that earned her a week's worth of performances at Harlem's famous Apollo theatre, the Savoy former bouncer and manager named Herbert White took notice. He was known as a street smart if somewhat shady figure with a white streak in his hair, nicknamed "Whitey." Recognizing the business potential of the new Lindy Hop craze and the cheap labor the young dancers would supply, he formed Whitey's Lindy Hoppers, recruiting Ms. Miller and others to go on tour.

In 1935, the dance troupe left for Europe, an extraordinary opportunity. Her parents were immigrants from Barbados, but her father died before she was born. Her mother reportedly worked as a charwoman. But she was surrounded by a vibrant, rich culture.

In some ways shielded and nurtured within Harlem, Ms. Miller had yet to experience the overtly racist world outside it, the warped notions about black communities across the United States.

"It allowed a little girl to grow up feeling her whole full self," said Mickey Davidson, a close friend of Ms. Miller, age 68, and a dancer, teacher and choreographer who lives in New York City.

Ms. Miller said that Whitey who "could charm the white out of rice" convinced her mother to let her go dance with Whitey's Lindy Hoppers dance troupe on a tour in Europe.

Ms. Miller checked out of school at 3 p.m. on a Friday and by midnight the 15-year-old was aboard a boat to England with the troupe. Picking up on America's fresh new sound of Harlem, Europe was just starting to swing. The troupe visited dance halls in England, France and Switzerland, but not Germany with its incoming Nazism. Over the next few years, back in the United States, the troupe toured the U.S. including Los Angeles.

The troupe appeared in the 1941 movie "Hellzapoppin'," executing high-flying moves at breakneck speeds with Ms. Miller playing a dancing cook. Later the group on tour in South America was stuck in Rio de Janeiro for months after the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Although Ms. Miller never married or had children of her own, she fell in love with an actor named Roy Glenn around this time. He had a "great voice," Ms. Miller said, taught her how to play pool, and came to watch her dance. Her wrote her love letters as she traveled back to New York but later they broke up. It took her "a long time to get over it," she said.

Ms. Miller finally left the troupe due to "accounting differences" with Whitey. The group finally fell apart as the young male dancers went to fight in World War II. In the 1950s and '60s, Ms. Miller toured with her own groups, Norma Miller Dancers and Norma Miller and Her Jazzmen. And in the mid 1950s in Miami, Ms. Miller expanded her performance skills to comedy shows. She admired comedians Richard Pryor and George Carlin and her own comedy routines could be as earthy and profane as theirs.

In Las Vegas in the '60s and '70s she performed with Redd Foxx and Sammy Davis Jr. In the early 1970s, she got an offer to perform her stand-up comedy routine in Vietnam for 10 months for \$10,000. Always looking for the next gig, she hopped on a plane and "played every base in Vietnam up to the DMZ (Demilitarized zone)."

These are just some of Ms. Miller's exploits and accomplishments as she appeared in dozens of documentaries, movies and stages over the years. She returned to New York for a while and later moved to Las Vegas.



COURTESY PHOTOS

Norma Miller with her Italian band; with John Biffar preparing for Barack Obama's inauguration; at the Apollo theatre in Harlem; and at the Fort Myers Film Festival with Eric Raddatz.

While there, the choreographer and director Debbie Allen recruited her to come to Los Angeles for Ms. Allen's 1992 film "Stompin' at the Savoy." Ms. Miller taught the younger dancers how to do the authentic Lindy Hop moves she was so famous for such as over the shoulder, upside down over the back, and the snatch.

"I'll never forget her saying, child I was waiting for this call for ever," Ms. Allen said. "She had been a fan of mine and what I was doing and it was just like the lights went on when I called her."

Ms. Allen described the Lindy Hop and music that inspired it as a "unifying force" in America.

"It's like hip-hop culture today," she said. "It is as big a phenomenon in any white community as it is where it came from in urban cities of America."

But Ms. Miller's proximity to fame and her own star power, the many stages and silver screens that she had graced, did not always equal financial security. Hanging on to the life of an independent performing artist meant hustling and a surviving.

When Mr. Biffar discovered her in Las Vegas and cast her in one of his movies, he recalls, she was in her 70s, living in a low-rent apartment with several cats and looking for her next gig. The next phase of her life was just beginning.

She started visiting Mr. Biffar and his family in Fort Myers over the holidays and finally one year she just decided to stay, he said, also helping raise his three sons.

As a stand-up comedian, Ms. Miller's act remained tack sharp with impeccable timing. At the Fort Myers Film Festival's TGIM night, just a few years ago, she had the audience in stitches.

This year, Mr. Biffar plans to release a new comedy special he recorded with her called "Norma Miller Unplugged" which he described as "very naughty."

Mr. Biffar recalled one of her jokes: "When you ain't got a horse, ride a cow."

"That was a metaphor for everything in her life because she may not have any money, but she always figured out a way to do what she wanted to do," he said.

"And that was really a great life lesson learned from her is you can do anything with the right attitude."

And attitude she had, in spades.

Russell Palen

July 3, 1962 – September 4, 2019

The Lee County Homeless Coalition held its annual vigil on a rainy night in downtown Fort Myers, Dec. 21. Umbrellas assembled by the steps of the old county courthouse to pay tribute to at least 27 homeless people who died this year, each signified by a candlelit white paper bag with their name printed on the front.

One read, "Russell Palen." He was found dead at 57 on Sept. 4 of natural causes, the Lee County Sheriff's Office said, at his tent in the woods in North Fort Myers. Like many of those who become homeless, Mr. Palen was estranged from his family. He was also considered an alcoholic, preferring beer, though unlike many addicts that did not extend to harder drugs, said Jan Frick, a medical homeless outreach worker with Family Health Centers who helped him over the years. During the last several years of his life he also quit drinking on his own. But in the end, she found that Mr. Palen didn't want to return to society.

"He had his own ideas about things," she said. Sometimes scruffy with an auburn beard and hair, his pale skin darkened from living outdoors, he was known by his nickname "Can Man" because he collected cans at different venues in North Fort Myers and carried them on his bicycle across the Old 41 bridge to cash them in at a recycling center.

"He wouldn't come in off of the streets because then he would have to obey the rules and he liked his own little practice collecting cans," Ms. Frick said. "And even though he quit drinking, he still would do his cans. That's just who he was and I think it would always be. He had his tent out in the woods, his tent and his little

setup and he didn't bother anybody and nobody bothered him."

She adds, "His personality was really nice. Everybody loved him... Even when he was drinking, he was a nice drunk, he wasn't like one of those mean drunks or anything."

Mr. Palen was born on July 3, 1962, in Morristown, N.J. He has a brother and sister-in-law who live out of state. They couldn't be reached to talk about him. None of the agencies that worked with Mr. Palen had a picture of him except the Sheriff's Office, when he was occasionally arrested for minor crimes such as having an open container of alcohol.

Mr. Palen regularly attended the long-running Wednesday homeless outreach program at All Souls Episcopal Church in North Fort Myers. Volunteers there said they were familiar with Mr. Palen from his presence over the years, though weren't familiar with his background.

"We all knew him but we didn't know him, you know what I'm saying?" said volunteer JoAnn Sandy.

The Rev. Sandra Johnson, who people know as Deacon Sandy, has known him through the outreach program for 15 years. When she first met him, he had just been hit by a car on his bicycle. That happened at least a few times.

The church held a service for Mr. Palen, whose ashes were placed in the Memorial Garden in front of the thrift store there.

Deacon Sandy said last year Mr. Palen started attending church regularly on Sunday.

"He not always but most of the time had a good attitude and was basically a happy person," she said. "I think coming to All Soul's every week he found a peace he'd never known before."

He also started feeding his racoon neighbors in the woods even though they got in to his food and things.

"He had a lot of friends but not very many close friends," Deacon Sandy said. "I loved him. I thought he was a sweet person and he was one of my favorites." ■