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A life remembered: James Conway's legacy was making city All-American

By Jessica Larsen | Jun 9, 2011 Updated Jun 23, 2021 0



The memory of James Conway lives on with his friends and family as a Marlboro Red cigarette, a cup of coffee and a Cubs baseball cap.

For the rest of La Crosse, Conway might not be a familiar face. But residents see a piece of him when they look at the train in Copeland Park — a display he helped bring to the city. They hear him when listening to the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse's radio station, WLSU — a project he headed. They live in a place he loved — La Crosse, for which he helped gain the title of All-American City.

Conway spent his life trying to make the city a better place up until his death from colon cancer in January in Florida, where he spent his winters. He was 79. His family will hold a memorial in his honor June 18.

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"He loved this place and everyone in it," said his friend Jim Gutzke, 76.

Conway's public radio legacy starts in 1970 after he began teaching in the UW-L mass communications department. That's where he started the radio station as a venue for students to gain experience.

He was "locally famous," Gutzke said, with his segment "Vox Pop," an interview talk show. Conway challenged ideas of racism and unfair treatment of the underdog, said his daughter, Cathleen Conway, 53.

"It didn't make him popular with some people," she said. "But it made others love him."

One of Conway's favorite achievements was when he and the advertising agency he worked for helped La Crosse be named an All-American City in 1965 by the National Civic League. The organization chooses 10 cities per year that demonstrate outstanding civic accomplishments.



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Conway's part in bringing the honor to La Crosse was recognized the next year when he was selected as parade marshal for Oktoberfest's Maple Leaf Parade.

Another was bringing the train to Copeland Park. Conway was always fascinated by the giant locomotives, so when a co-worker at the radio station approached him with the idea in the 1960s, he quickly agreed to help, Cathleen Conway said. The pair raised funds and convinced the railroad to donate the train cars.

"He was always getting involved in projects like that," his friend John Jenks said. "Anything for the community."

Conway moved into his house in 1965. That was his hideaway from the rest of the world, said his former student and colleague Bob Seaquist, 63. It was there he and second wife, Barbara, hosted bonfire parties and raised their Irish setters, all five named "Clancy."

His friends say his work in La Crosse made the city a better place to live. To his family, Conway's influence was more emotional.

Cathleen Conway's first memory of her father is a vague feeling of being cold. She remembers her face being numb, her arms out.

"I was flying," she said, wiping away a tear. "It wasn't scary. I was safe."

For years she couldn't figure out what the memory was. About 20 years ago her dad finally told her: It was after her parents got divorced. She was 3 years old and her dad had taken her ice skating on the pond behind their house.

"I wasn't very good, so he picked my up and put me on his shoulders," she said. "I was flying. That's the most amazing place I can go in my mind."

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