



Obituary



Nick Klaras Emeritus Board Member 1928 - 2009

Nick Klaras plays the drums during the last reunion of his jazz band at Ridgewood Country Club in August 2008. (Rod Aydelotte photo)

The Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and the City of Waco lost a great friend with the passing of retired restaurateur and Waco "ambassador" Nick Klaras.

Nick was a treasure of the community, a grandfatherly figure who constantly assisted many charities and causes without fanfare. He served on the Board of the TRHFM and lent his support and considerable knowledge of catering to planning efforts. His legendary jazz band volunteered to play at numerous TRHFM functions, even when he was waging a heroic struggle against illness. When challenges appeared, a pat on the back and a word of support from Nick always meant that they would be overcome.

Nick personified the best qualities of Waco. The Board, City of Waco and TRHFM Staff extend our deepest condolences to his family.

We are better for having known Nick.

Obituary

Nikolas "Nick" Klaras
December 15, 1928 - October 4, 2009

Nick was born on December 15, 1928, in Waco to Pete and Mary Klaras. He was a 1947 graduate of Waco High School. Nick played the drums from an early age, was head drum major of the Waco High Tiger Band and enjoyed playing big band and swing music all of his life. He was a 1952 graduate of Baylor University with a Bachelor of Business Administration. He met and began his courtship with the love of his life, Luanne Miller Evans, while at Baylor, and they formally began their life's journey together on June 19, 1955.

Nick served in the 143rd Infantry Regiment of the Texas National Guard from 1947 to 1959. He was a quality control analyst for Phillips Petroleum Company (later known as Hercules) from 1953 to 1958, when as he often times said, "I decided to answer the call of my nationality and went into the restaurant business." He operated the first Nick's Restaurant in Westview Bowling Lanes from 1958 until 1965. Wishing to own their own building and expand their restaurant concept, Nick and Luanne purchased land at 4508 West Waco Drive and built Nick's Restaurant and Catering in 1965. The restaurant enjoyed a long and successful life serving Greek and American cuisine for over 30 years, ending with Nick's retirement and the restaurant's closing in 1996.

His professional service and achievements include director/president of the Waco Chapter of the Texas Restaurant Association, restaurateur of the year (Waco Chapter), state director of the Texas Restaurant Association and TSTC food service advisory board member. His community service and achievements include, vice chairman/trustee of McLennan Community College, director/president of the Baylor Bear Foundation, director of the Baylor Waco Foundation, board member of the Waco Chamber of Commerce, member of the first Waco Convention & Tourism Advisory Board, Heart of the Texas Boy Scouts board member, founding member of the Waco Jazz Orchestra, and director of the Waco Rotary Club. His most cherished roles were volunteering and supporting the Heart of Texas MHMR's Klaras Children's Center, which was established in memory of Nick and Luanne's son, Cameron, and in honor of their work for the MHMR center.

Nick was a lifelong member of St. Nicholas Orthodox Church where he served as president of the parish council and co-chair of the Greek Food Festival.

Nick had a passion and love for his customers, friends and people in general, Baylor athletics, "especially football," and great music. The jazz reunion that he organized in the 1970's with his friends from his youth was a greatly enjoyed annual event for over 30 years.

He was preceded in death by his son, Cameron; parents, Pete and Mary; and his infant brother, George.

He is survived by his wife, Luanne; son, Evan and wife, Kimberly; daughter, Karen Goss and husband, Grant; grandchildren, Cameron Goss and wife, Jiff; Christopher Goss; Kent and Katie Klaras and Branch and Sterling Musil; sisters, Estelle Klaras and Pat Grammas and husband, Cameron, of Birmingham, Alabama; and cousins, Mary Klaras; George Klaras and wife, Wanda; Vicki Klaras and Patricia Klaras.

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By Mike Copeland Tribune-Herald business editor
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Nick Klaras, whose Nick's restaurant became the standard for fine dining in Waco, died Sunday morning at his home after a long battle with leukemia. He was 80.

Longtime friends remember Klaras as a man who loved life, enjoyed serving delicious Greek dishes and entertained crowds for decades with his drumming in several jazz bands.

With a congenial manner and warm smile, Klaras never seemed to meet a stranger. Even those not part of his family referred to him as “Papa Nick” or “Uncle Nick.”

“I can’t think of Waco without Nick Klaras,” said David Smith, former Waco city manager.

Owning a restaurant was something Klaras always wanted to do. He followed in the footsteps of his father, Pete, a native of Greece, who operated Pete’s Cafe in downtown Waco for decades.

“I grew up working for my dad,” Klaras told the *Tribune-Herald* in a 1996 interview. “I put in five years with Phillips Petroleum, but I always wanted my own place.”

He got it in 1959, when he opened a little eatery called Nick’s in the old Westview bowling lanes on West Waco Drive. The Nick’s that generations of Waco residents came to love opened six years later. With its fine food, white napkins and tuxedo-clad waiters, it gained a sterling reputation among those wanting to impress friends or a date.

Klaras’ son, Evan, described his father as “a great dad and a great role model.”

“He had the unique ability to make you part of his family, whether you were a blood relative or not,” he said. “He did it every day through his work and through his community service. He was just a special, special guy.”

Klaras often would greet diners with a warm handshake or hug and frequently would ask about their family. It seemed everyone in Waco knew Nick Klaras. His place hosted wedding receptions, marriage proposals and Baylor University crowds after Saturday football games. The Waco City Council for years ate a “working lunch” at Nick’s before its weekly council meeting, discussing agenda items while enjoying a meal with the local news media.

Smith, city manager from 1970 to 1989, recalled an occasion that revealed Klaras’ tender side.

“Back during urban renewal, they tore down the building where Nick’s dad ran his restaurant. It was on the square, and I remember retrieving the street sign at that spot,” Smith said. “I took it to my office and called Nick, told him I had something he might like to see. He couldn’t keep the tears out of his eyes, and I think he kept that sign in his restaurant until he closed it.”

Music always filled Nick’s. Klaras himself was quite a drummer in his day. But for diners, the mellow sounds were provided by his sister, Estelle, who played standards and requests on the piano. Son Evan leaned toward jazz guitar.

After 31 years in the business, Nick and his wife, Luanne, decided to leave behind the 15-hour days. They sold the Nick’s building in 1996 to longtime restaurateur Ted Gonzalez, who relocated his El Conquistador restaurant there from across the street.

Sammy Citrano, the successful owner of George’s Restaurant & Catering, said he got to know Klaras after he moved to Waco in 1986 to serve as managing partner of The Elite Cafe.

“People told me there was someone I needed to meet, and it was Nick,” Citrano said. “I got involved with him in the restaurant association, and he was somebody to look up to and respect. He taught us all a lot about putting your best foot forward and treating others with dignity. When you say Nick and Luanne, you’re talking one of a kind.”

Klaras may have been so much like family that Citrano called him “Papa Nick,” but that did not detract from his competitiveness as a businessman, Citrano said.

“When you lost to Nick on catering work, he might beat you by 25 cents per person,” Citrano said.

Life for Nick and Luanne revolved around more than running a restaurant for more than three decades.

When their younger son, Cameron, died in 1979, the family designated McLennan County Mental Health-Mental Retardation as a memorial recipient. Gifts in Cameron’s memory flooded the agency as it was looking to open a facility for youngsters, and the directors asked permission to use the Klaras name.

The Klaras Children’s Center works with developmentally delayed youngsters, attempting to bring them up to speed with other children of the same age.

Klaras played drums with several Waco jazz groups but became most identified with a jazz ensemble called the Joe Johnson Orchestra, named after the judge who once presided over Waco’s 170th State District Court.

“We had a damned good band, and we had a great time playing together,” Johnson said. “What we liked to play was jazz, which is foreign to a lot of people, but we made it sound real good.”

The band entertained at venues all over Central Texas in the ’40s and ’50s and became regulars at such nightclubs as Casablanca, Scenic Wonderland, Terrace Club and Arnold’s Supper Club.

For years, band members who had scattered all over the United States gathered annually in Waco to reminisce about old times.

Klaras typically served as host, with band members enjoying food and fun at his restaurant.

“We played together in junior high, high school and college, in various bands,” Klaras said during a reunion in 1996. “Some are now retired from the Air Force; we have a judge and two physicists” in the group.

The last reunion reportedly took place in 2008.

Deane Johnson said the band members developed deep friendships that held them together in good times and bad. She said Klaras was best man at her marriage to Joe in 1951, and their four children have grown up calling Klaras “Uncle Nick.”

“Joe made three CDs, and I wanted him to make a fourth,” Deane Johnson said. “I kept telling Nick to get well because we needed a drummer.”

Klaras and Evan took their talents to the Waco Jazz Orchestra in recent years. Performances at Indian Spring Park could be seen on local TV channels.

Klaras graduated from Waco High School in 1947 and from Baylor University in 1952. It was at Baylor where Klaras met his wife.

