

OBITUARIES

DICK NUNIS | 1932–2023

Dick Nunis Got the Magic Kingdom Open

By CHRIS KORNELIS

When Disneyland opened in 1955, it was, in many ways, a disaster: There were rides out of service, restaurants that ran out of food, soft asphalt that consumed the heels of women’s shoes—all of it broadcast on national television.

Little wonder, then, that there was trepidation as the Walt Disney company approached the 1971 opening of the far more ambitious Walt Disney World, especially as the word spread that it might not open in time. So, when Dick Nunis, the head of operations at the parks in Anaheim and Orlando, took control of the project, he was given carte blanche to do whatever it took to open the gates on Oct. 1.

“There wasn’t anybody on that property who thought we were going to open on time,” said Dick Evans, one of the park’s managers on opening day who later ran Madison Square Garden Corp. and a number of other sports and entertainment companies. “And opening on time was critical to the company. We were at that point in debt up to our eyeballs. We’d borrowed close to \$400 million to build phase one of Walt Disney World. And within a week of the time that he came on the property, the entire perspective changed. The energy level changed. He came in there like a tornado.”

Nunis, who died Dec. 13 at the age of 91, fired contractors who got in the way, held meetings at 5 a.m. and put signs up all over the property that said the park would open on Oct. 1. He made sure construction workers knew that their families were invited to the park a week before opening. He flew palm trees in on helicopters the night before the gates opened.

Not only did he understand the logistics of what it would take to hire thousands of employees, motivate construction workers and oversee the myriad details of opening a resort, he had worked closely with Walt Disney for a decade and knew how the company’s founder and creative visionary—who had been dead for almost five years—would have wanted it done.

“He understood the culture that Walt wanted there,” said



Dick Nunis, who died Dec. 13 at the age of 91, was the person Disney relied on to make sure Disney World opened on time. Left photo, Nunis and his wife, Mary.



Sandy Quinn, who started as marketing director of the resort years before it opened. “Walt didn’t want employees, he wanted a cast. He didn’t want customers, he wanted guests. They weren’t uniforms, they were costumes. And it was a mindset.”

Nunis didn’t just get the Magic Kingdom and the first phase of Disney World open as planned. He spent his 44-year career at Disney opening and overseeing parks around the world, and acting as a steward of Walt Disney’s philosophies as the company grew in the decades after his death in 1966.

Michael Eisner, the company’s longtime chief executive, said that by opening and running the parks—what he

calls the “tailwind that creates the culture and the image for the company”—Nunis was an important figure in maintaining and expanding Walt Disney’s vision.

“Walt Disney Imagineering was the creative force, but Dick was the operational force,” Eisner said. “And in that sense, he understood Walt’s desire for Disney University, Walt’s desire for training, Walt’s desire for excellence, Walt’s desire for cleanliness, happiness and all the like.”

Picking fruit

Richard Arlen Nunis was born on May 30, 1932, in Cedartown, Ga., to Winnie and Doyce Nunis. The family was

poor and, in a scene straight out of “The Grapes of Wrath,” eventually drove to California looking for places to pick fruit. At night, they slept in their car.

“They didn’t have an easy life, and I think that’s why he worked so hard,” said his wife, Mary Nunis. “He had just such a work ethic and he expected that from other people.”

The family eventually settled in the Los Angeles area. In his memoir, “Walt’s Apprentice: Keeping the Disney Dream Alive,” he wrote that “in our home, all the light and warmth came from my mother.” His father, he wrote, was an alcoholic who “thought better of smacking me around, and by the time I was around twelve, he knew I would fight to protect my mother.”

Nunis played football at Manual Arts High School and earned a scholarship to play at the University of Southern California. His career ended when he broke his neck in a game against UCLA in 1952. He graduated with a degree in education in 1955. That spring, he took a job working at Disneyland.

When Nunis joined the

company, the park hadn’t opened yet, and he was part of the orientation team that trained its staff and executives, including Walt Disney himself. The company’s founder took special notice of Nunis and they worked together closely until Disney’s death in 1966.

“I had no idea at the time, but in those early years with Walt, he was looking for someone he could mentor by nurturing, challenging, and testing, to ensure that his ideals and those dreams would live on,” Nunis wrote in his memoir. “He was looking for an ‘apprentice.’ As that apprentice, my role and my life expanded beyond what I had ever imagined.”

Moving up

Nunis rose through the ranks quickly at Disneyland, becoming director of park operations in 1961 and vice president of operations in 1968. Former colleagues said he could walk through the park and see things needed to be fixed or out of line that nobody else could see. Bill Sullivan, who worked with Nunis for decades and eventually became vice president

of the Magic Kingdom, said he was “tougher than hell,” but also “loyal to his people and his people were loyal to him.”

“He was a pusher and he knew what he wanted to do and he got it done and he knew how to get people to get it done,” Sullivan said.

Nunis was later named executive vice president of both parks, president of the company’s Outdoor Recreation Division and chairman of Walt Disney Attractions. He served on the Walt Disney board from 1981 until his retirement in 1999.

In addition to his wife, Mary, Nunis is survived by his son Rich, from his marriage to June Nunis, as well as his son Corey and daughter, Lisa Parks, Mary’s children from a previous marriage that he adopted. He was preceded in death by Lisa Nunis, his and June’s daughter.

After he retired from Disney, he and Mary spent a lot of time supporting the University of Central Florida, where he was recruited by then-Governor Jeb Bush to be the first chair of its board of trustees in 2001.

Rick Walsh, who succeeded him as chair, said Nunis and the board that he chaired were instrumental in growing UCF into one of the nation’s largest public universities (more than 70,000 students) and a major research institution. He helped in building its athletic program—which competes in most sports in the Big 12 conference—as well as the campus infrastructure that goes along with it, including a football stadium. In an email, Bush said Nunis was a “a wonderful person and a talented businessman” who “helped build UCF into the powerhouse that it is today.”

Mary Nunis said that although the couple visited Walt Disney World on occasion after he retired, he didn’t walk the park as he had for the more than 40 years he was with the company, which she believed was because he wouldn’t be able to handle seeing something he wanted to change and not be able to change it. But he remained fiercely loyal to Walt Disney and his ideas.

“He just loved Walt Disney,” Mary Nunis said, “and knew that dream was what he wanted to try to maintain.”

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Christmas Tree Fans Branch Out

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9, pinky-promised to help this year. Her husband agreed to assist more too and even said he would build her a shed to store decorations, including hundreds of artificial flowers. Errol, who founded a software company, foresees a few key benefits to building the shed. More space in the garage is one.

Another, he says: “Happy wife, happy life.”

The decorators say they like having a creative hobby and something a bit surprising to show visitors. Many say seeing their trees gives them an all-season dopamine hit. “There’s always something to celebrate,” says Cynthia Chamble.

About five years ago, Chamble started decorating her tree for three holidays a year. She’s now up to six. The Brooklyn, N.Y., retiree enjoys the creative outlet and says constantly seeing her 5-foot tree makes her feel like she’s in a forest. She spends about \$600 a year on tree décor, including artificial flowers and ribbons.

Her favorite designs include one with blue and white trim to commemorate Israel, a summer-themed tree with sandal ornaments and plastic fish, and one for Black History



Year-round decorators say they like the creative outlet. Above, Michelle Meyer’s Mardi Gras tree, Sami Riccioli’s St. Patrick’s Day tree and Meyer’s Flag Day tree.



Month that had cutout pictures of historical figures.

Her family and friends have come to accept her hobby, she says. They’ve also figured out why she occasionally invites them over for home-cooked macaroni and cheese.

“They’ll say, you need help taking down some decorations, huh, Cynthia?” she says.

For Deb Ireland, decorating her tree for various holidays has become a way to bond with her eight grandchildren, aged 8 to 12.

Her butterfly tree is a fan

favorite, says Ireland, a retired teacher in Waseca, Minn. Her grandchildren help make the butterflies out of tissue paper and pipe cleaners. Some of them are camera-ready, and others not so much—but it’s no matter to Ireland.

“Even the butterflies with one wing are put on the tree,” she says.

Michelle Meyer generally doesn’t like to imitate the latest decorating trends in the tree world. She passed on the candy cane look that seemed to be all over social media this

past Christmas season. She opted for a winter theme that included large snowflakes for her 7-foot silver tinsel tree.

Among her family’s best-loved looks are her trees for Mardi Gras—including colorful masks and beaded necklaces—and Flag Day.

Decorating is a way for her to memorialize her late mother, who always decked out her own house for various holidays, says Meyer, in Frederick, Md. “It makes me feel close to her and reminds me that I’m a lot like her,” she says.

Corey Davey, an interior designer in Dallas, says an increased desire for a sense of comfort at home is one reason people are keeping their trees up year-round.

A longing to maintain the sense of joy that may be associated with the holidays is another motivator, says Karol Ward, a therapist in New York City. What began as a hobby for interior designer Sami Riccioli has evolved into a business. About four years ago she decided to decorate her tree for holidays including St. Pat-

rick’s Day and Cinco de Mayo.

Her trees’ popularity on Instagram attracted the attention of companies. She now gets paid to design custom trees for store windows and recently created one to promote a movie, says Riccioli, in Lower Gwynedd, Pa.

She still occasionally gets some side-eye from people who visit her home.

“One repairman said he thought I still had my Christmas tree up in April because I was too lazy to take it down,” she says.

FROM LEFT: MICHELLE MEYER; SAMI RICCIOLI; MICHELLE MEYER