

Neighbors in Our Midst

An interview with Jon MacDonald by Dan Reeves

I recently interviewed an interesting resident from Pine Trace, Jon MacDonald for our new column, Neighbors in Our Midst. Although he left Chautauqua, New York in 1972, he has been a resident in Palm Aire since 2000. Jon retired in 2017 and used to work as bartender and Beverage manager at the very popular Sawmill Inn Restaurant in Sarasota. He then spent 33 years in wine and spirit sales.



Jon MacDonald

Since retirement, he has worked part-time as a tour guide leading the Discover Sarasota Tours' popular City Sightseeing Tour. He says that of all of his jobs, this is the one he loves the best. He said, "This is the one job that I like to get up and go to! This is the most fun I've ever had collecting a paycheck." What follows are excerpts from our interview.

DAN: What prompted you to move to Sarasota?

JON: I've moved here in 1972. My mom and her husband-to-be, Curt Haug, had moved here from Western New York state. That's where I grew up Chautauqua.

DAN: So that's where your famous stepdad, the first director of the Van Wezel, is from?

JON: Well, that's where he met my mom. And, he ran YMCAs throughout the Northeast and then ended up at Chautauqua Institution. He started as treasurer there and ended up as president. He met my mom there; they fell in love and moved down here after he took his position as managing director.

JON: I came down to visit and I stayed in 1972. I thought this place was fantastic. For the last three years, I've been very, very proud to be a tour guide downtown working for Discover Sarasota Tours.

Believe it or not, I'd always wanted to be a tour guide. Any time I went on a tour, any vacation trip, Boston, Atlanta, wherever I turned to my wife and say, Janet, I want to be a tour guide when I finally grow up!

DAN: Well, you know, I've read a few reviews of your role as tour guide, and it turns out you've received some fantastic ratings and compliments on Trip Advisor.

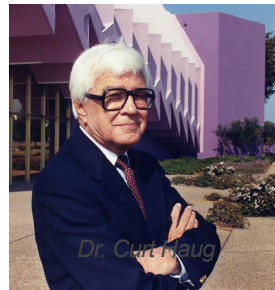
JON: Well, I'm one of the guides. We're all very, very good. I'm very proud of the reviews that I get, that our company gets for sure. My job is to educate our trolley patrons on Sarasota's colorful history, which is amazing, and its current great restaurants, theaters, museums, and so on. And I entertainingly do that so that my customers have fun. Almost customers report that they never knew there was so much history here, even if they've lived here 30 or 40 years,

DAN: That sounds wonderful. I know on your tour, you stop by the Van Wezel and that's where your stepdad used to be the director.

JON: Correct.

DAN: And, from what you've told me in the past, you spend more time there than any other spot in your tour. Can you tell me why you do that?

JON: Because of the Van Wezel story and my stepdad's contributions to Sarasota. My guests on the tours are heartfelt by this, they're like, "Aw, that's an awesome moment". I don't mean to sound corny when I say it, but that building is why I moved to Sarasota. My mom fell in love with a very good man. And, he elevated the culture of Sarasota from what John Ringling started by bringing outstanding art theater and cultural events to Sarasota at the Van Wezel.



Sarasota kind of laid dormant for years until the late sixties when we got urban sprawl. We got shopping centers instead of just downtown Sarasota. This town started growing in the sixties. By the late sixties, a plan for this wonderful theater called Van Wezel materialized. Timing is everything, and my stepdad, Curt

Haug just happened to see an ad in one of the trade magazines of a new theater opening in Sarasota.

He was running Chautauqua Institution in New York. He applied for the job and got it. And that's what brought my mom and Curt down here. So I came down, I became spoiled. I got to go see any show for free and meet stars and get autographs and pictures. I have a nice scrapbook of autographs and photographs and the experience was wonderful, but what I was saying, Curt elevated from an already growing cultural town into a huge cultural town because it had this incredible new performing space that artists from all over the country and the world wanted to come to perform. After all, word got out about how great a venue it is.

This theater is, as you know, in a beautiful city called Sarasota. Most performers like Pavarotti or, Count Basie, Leonard Bernstein or Lucille ball had never heard of our town, but they heard of it after they started playing here. And, they wanted to come back.

DAN: I understand that your stepdad used to call agents and say, I hear that, for example, Ella Fitzgerald is going to play in Miami. Can she stop in Sarasota on her way? And, Curt would convince the agent to let her take a side trip to the Van Wezel.

I also heard that he used to drive up to the Tampa airport and pick up the entertainers himself and bring them down. Did you ever go along?

JON: I never did. I was a young guy in my twenties at that time, just wanting to be a bartender and have fun, but I got to meet all these stars. I got to meet many stars.

I remember when he drove with my mom to the Tampa airport, picked up Grant and Lucille Ball.

DAN: Now there's a story about Cary Grant and your stepdad's glasses. Tell me about that.

JON: You can see in the pictures of my stepdad, that he looks a lot like Cary Grant. He's got that big, healthy, thick white hair. He prided himself that he did look like Cary Grant in his older age. So when he got to meet Grant, he says, "We kind of look alike. Don't we?" Grant paused and looked at Curt and said, "Even more so if you had horn-rimmed glasses like mine." Grant took off his eyeglasses and gave them to Curt. He had to change the prescription, of course.

DAN: So, I guess, that's how Curt Haug's horn-rim glasses became his signature appearance style for the rest of his life.

JON: Yes, that's right. He idolized Grant, and, after his next trip to Italy, Grant sent Curt two more pairs of specially designed Italian frames.

DAN: Now of all the characters you've met, which one stands out the most?

That's a tough question. Gary Grant was a true gentleman. I also got to go to see him at Ruth Eckerd Hall in St. Petersburg. Got a Christmas card from him. He was the ultimate of class, just like he was in his movies. So I would say I've had to pick one gentleman, without doubt, it's Cary Grant. Number two would be Burt Reynolds, and Reynolds was fun. Good guy class act. You know, his movies portrayed him as a goofball, but he was a true, blessed quality actor. And a gentleman that I admired. I loved Burt.

Tony Bennett also comes to mind, he performed at Van Wezel eight times and said it was the greatest acoustics he's ever sung in his life. And, that's big praise from him. Curt had an autographed picture of Bennett in his office.

DAN: What do you think Curt's most prominent success was?

JON: Other than marrying my mom, which was true, I mean, they were both blessed. They were there at the right time, the right place to find each other, second marriages for both. So that, that would be his number one achievement in life. But he raised the cultural status of this little fishing town called Sarasota to an entertainment hub, and he was proud of it. He loved Van Wezel. He loved it!

DAN: I read where he once said he was married to his wife and to the Van Wezel.

JON: I think that's probably true. Incidentally, they got married in the Van Wezel.

DAN: He wrote a book called the Performers at the Purple.

JON: Right, and it's anecdotal some humorous, some not so humorous about the different stars who performed at the hall. He also wrote about the true quality of these entertainers as people, not just as show people. Some were prima donnas who had to have all it all, but Curt wrote about them as human beings.

DAN: I believe he said something once that the Van Wezel sold more condominiums on Longboat key than realtors did.

JON: That sounds like him. He had a very dry, subtle way of patting himself on the back. Deservedly so. He befriended a lot of local artists, architects authors and musicians because there was this arts colony of people here, and he wanted to promote the arts, the Van Wezel and Sarasota.

JON: He learned about them. There were artists like Syd Solomon, one of the greatest Sarasota artists of all time, and, and the authors, like my namesake John D. MacDonald. He lived here through the sixties and the seventies. There was a colony, if you will, of all these artistic people.

DAN: He started the Van Wezel Foundation, which focused on fundraising, right?

JON: Exactly. He started it and he was its first president and not coincidentally that's the organization right now, that's pushing for a new concert hall and theatre for Sarasota.

DAN: Curt Haug has certainly contributed to our Suncoast during his 17 years as director. It's certainly been a pleasure talking to you, learning about you and your famous stepfather. Best wishes to you, and keep up the good public relations tour on the trolley.

JON: Thanks for having me.

To take one of Jon's sightseeing tours, go to discoversarasotatours.com

Dr. Curt Haug graduated from the University of Richmond in Virginia. During his successful career, his alma mater awarded him the honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters.

On November 19, 2018, The City Commission of the City of Sarasota passed a memorial resolution in honor of Curt Haug for his dedication to the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall and the City realizing further that his death is a distinct loss to all citizens of our community and that he will be truly missed by all who knew him.