

Les Garner remembered for positive attitude, charity work

By Ginger Livingston
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A former Greenville mayor and community leader was remembered Tuesday for his friendship and devotion to community.

Les Garner, 89, died at Pitt County Memorial Hospital on Monday after suffering a fall Saturday night. He owned a wholesale distribution company, was a longtime supporter of East Carolina University's Pirate Club, an officer in Kiwanis and a supporter of numerous community charities.

Ed Daughtry knew Garner for about 40 years.

"He was a very successful businessman, and he just liked to share his success, especially when it came to helping children, especially children who were less fortunate than the rest of us. He was a workaholic when it came to charity-type events," Daughtry said.

Daughtry became Garner's partner and eventually took over operation of the peanut-pecan sale that raises money for Kiwanis charities. It started with placing bags of nuts in local supermarkets and convenience stores. Garner applied his acumen for wholesaling, and the number of stores selling nuts grew, Daughtry said.

"He got real excited when we were doing things," Daughtry said. "He loved to sell. When we went to a Piggly Wiggly (wholesale convention) a few years ago, and about 70 stores were there, and we sold to every one.

"He was so excited about the sale, and he was driving ... well, I had to get him to stop the car and let me drive because he was too excited to drive," Daughtry said.

Garner fell on some brick steps at the home of a friend after attending the annual Service League Charity Ball on Saturday night and an East Carolina University baseball game earlier in the day, according to friends. He suffered a head injury.

Garner sang "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" at many ECU baseball games and did so again on Saturday.

He started his singing stint in 2005 after leading a Kiwanis group in a rendition of the song when former baseball coach Randy Mazey spoke. The coach was so impressed he invited Garner to sing at a home game, said Mark Wharton, the Pirate Club's executive director.

"It developed into a tradition, and being in the press box for most games he just brought a lot of positive energy. He was a positive person," he said.

ECU will remember Garner on Thursday when the Pirates play Oklahoma State. A moment of silence will be held before the bottom of the seventh inning, and the audience will then be invited to sing along with a videotape of Garner's performance, said Jimmy Bass, ECU senior associate director of athletics.

"He meant an awful lot to Pirate baseball over the years, and this is a small tribute from us to him," Bass said.

Garner also served as mayor of Greenville from 1986-87. He was honored by the Greenville-Pitt County Chamber of Commerce as its Citizen of the Year in 1976 and in January was named its second Legends Award recipient. Known as "Mr. Kiwanis," he helped organize more than 50 clubs and served as governor of the Carolinas District.

A native of Newport, Garner graduated from Greenville High School in 1937. He was a World War II veteran, honored for distinguished service as a radio operator and nose gunner on B-24s. He flew 51 missions over Europe and was awarded four air medals and two presidential unit citations.

Garner married the former Evelyn Griffin of Williamston and raised five children, including two foster children.

He was a founding partner in Garner Wynne Manning, from which he retired in 1990.

Community leader dies after fall

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Garner was well known in Greenville for his support of charitable causes, his devotion to Kiwanis and for backing ECU and its sports teams. He sang "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" at many ECU baseball games and did so again on Saturday. His voice was missed during Sunday's game.

Garner served as mayor of Greenville in 1986-87. He was honored by the Greenville-Pitt County Chamber of Commerce as its Citizen of the Year in 1976 and just last month as its second Legends Award recipient. Known as "Mr. Kiwanis," he helped organize more than 50 clubs and served as governor of the Carolinas District. He was a member of University City Kiwanis, which he founded in 1972, and was an honorary member of several local clubs.

Garner, a native of Newport who moved to Greenville with his family in 1931, graduated from Greenville High School in 1937. He was a World War II veteran, honored for distinguished service as a radio operator and nose gunner on B-24s. He flew 51 missions over Europe and was awarded four air medals and two presidential unit citations.

Garner married the former Evelyn Griffin of Williamston and raised five children, including two foster children.

He was a founding partner in a successful wholesale business, Garner Wynne Manning, from which he retired in 1990.

Garner was inducted into Kiwanis in 1968 and was named "Kiwanian of the Year" in 1971 by the Greenville Kiwanis Club. He served as lieutenant governor of the Carolinas District in 1974-75 and later as governor of the Carolinas District, chartering 26 clubs while serving in those roles. In all, he had a hand in organizing more than 50 Kiwanis clubs, including the first Golden K Club (1975) and the first all-female club (1987) in Kiwanis International.

Garner also was a former president of the ECU Pirate Club, a charter member of St. James United Methodist Church and chairman of its advisory board, chairman of the Salvation Army advisory board, master of the local Masonic Lodge and grand master of Grand Lodge of North Carolina. He was a 33rd degree mason and an honorary member of 10 lodges in North Carolina.