

# Five Local Shining Stars Will Be Missed

By Tom Burkard (Photos Submitted)



**Jim Kilcomins**

The City of South Amboy and Borough of Sayreville recently lost five of their most prominent and loved citizens, Jim Kilcomins, Mary Rita McCarthy, Judge Joe Hoffman, Mary LaVerne O'Leary and Bonnie Downs. They were all highly-respected, pillars of the community, who truly made this world a better place. They will be missed so very much, but always remembered.

Jim Kilcomins, 71, formerly of South Amboy died on Sept. 16. He founded the Melrose Blackhawks Senior Drum & Bugle Corps in 1979, and through his efforts the talented Corps would entertain millions of people at parades and other events over the past 30 years. His son-in-law Todd Norton, owner of Todd's Dugout in South Amboy, said, "Jim never had a bad word to say about anyone. He always had a joke to tell." Jim's daughter Colleen said, "He was the best dad a daughter could ever wish for." Kilcomins was also a great outdoorsman who loved hunting, fishing, trapping, etc. But, his main hobby was the Melrose Blackhawks, who accomplished so much under his leadership. In 1991, the Corps became the first senior drum corps to march in a parade at Disneyworld, Orlando, Florida. In addition, they represented the state of New Jersey at the American Legion National Conventions in Baltimore, Indiana, Pittsburgh, and North Carolina. They also performed at Yankee Stadium for the NY Yankees, and at halftime for the NJ Nets. The Melrose Blackhawks are also the 2009 NJ American Legion Champions.

Mary Rita McCarthy, 60, of South Amboy died on Sept. 30th. She was a very kind-hearted person who would help anyone in need. In addition, she led an active lifestyle, loved people, music and life. Mary Rita was a clerk for the city of South Amboy before retiring in 2008. She was also chairperson for the Johnny Z/ Woody M Scholarship Committee.

Judge Joseph Hoffman, 70, of Morgan died on Oct. 3rd. Joe was a Middlesex County Municipal Court Judge appointed to South Amboy, where he served for 37 years. A highly-respected man, who loved



**Bonnie Downs**

the outdoors, he was down-to-earth, and when away from court, enjoyed being just a regular guy.

Joe spent a lot of time fishing down at the South Amboy Beach, or at the Water Works Pond, and was also a pretty good basketball and softball player in the South Amboy's Men's Senior Leagues in the 1970's with the South Amboy A.A.

I heard a story from an inside source that a couple of men who were sentenced to prison by Judge Hoffman, respected him so much, that they sent him Christmas cards from prison. Now that's really saying something!

Mary LaVerne O'Leary, 79, of South Amboy died on Oct. 6th. She was a graduate of St. Peter's Nursing School, worked at St. Peter's Hospital, Perth Amboy Hospital, and was the School Nurse for 25 years at St. Ambrose Grammar School in Old Bridge. In 2005, she was selected "Irish Woman of the Year" by the LAOH. Her husband was the late South Amboy Police Chief, Edward O'Leary.

Bonnie Downs, 79, of Sayreville died on Oct. 12th. She was a hard-working, self-employed Public Accountant for 55 years, yet still found the time to get involved and help out in the numerous civic organizations she belonged to. If you were fortunate enough to know Bonnie Downs, you probably know that she was a very kind-hearted and caring person, and loved people. Bonnie was a wonderful friend, who loved The South Amboy-Sayreville Times, and as one of Sayreville's most knowledgeable historians went out of her way many times, to help The SA Times doing research on the Borough of Sayreville. She was very proud of her family, and loved them dearly. I will truly miss her happy, smiling face, and always kind and uplifting words of wisdom.

Mary Rita McCarthy Remembered  
Camille Tooker, South Amboy Business Administrator "She will be really missed by the community. She brought so much laughter to people over the years. She was a wonderful person, and it's leaving a big



**Judge Joseph Hoffman**

void here in City Hall."

Dr. Kathy Therkelsen "She was a fire-cracker, and loved by everyone."

Burk Lambertson Sr. "She was a terrific person, a lot of fun to be with, and she liked people."

Mary Kate Vacca "We worked in court together, and she made the job so much lighter and funnier. We also had a lot of fun dee-jaying. We were like sisters. Every day was a good time with Mary Rita."

Judge Joseph Hoffman Remembered  
Camille Tooker, South Amboy Business Administrator "He was dedicated to his position here at the City of South Amboy, and when he wasn't feeling well, he still came in and ran his court. He was a big piece of the community, and always took an interest in everything. He will be missed by many."

Darren LaVigne, South Amboy's Acting Police Chief "He was a great man, great citizen, a great man for the City of South Amboy. He had compassion and empathy for a lot of people. He helped as many people as he was forced to pass judgement on. He was a great person for the environment - a naturalist by heart, he loved nature, he loved the environment, and he loved people."

Ed Paczkowski, Owner of South Amboy Foodtown "We were good friends and grew up together. We played a lot of sports and cards together. Whenever we had a problem here, we'd call him and ask what to do. He was always friendly."

Mary Kate Vacca "He was a really good guy, very smart, very caring and fair about everything. He was there for me when my



**Mary Rita McCarthy**

mom passed away suddenly. He cared about people who worked for him, and he cared a lot about clients. He didn't want to throw people in jail. He was a great guy. I'll miss him a lot."

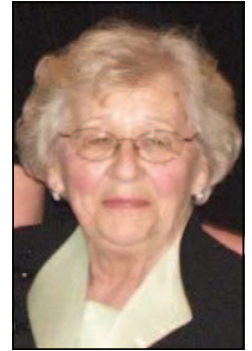
Mike DeLucia, South Amboy Code Enforcement Officer "Before court we would talk about baseball. He was a Mets fan forever. It's a shame that he's gone. Those Tuesdays and Thursdays won't be the same without Joe Hoffman. He was a good guy with diverse interests, an avid fisherman and hunter. He'll be sorely missed."

Judy O'Connor "He was a great man to work for. I loved having conversations with him because he was so diverse in his knowledge of fishing, and hunting, along with the law. I will miss him."

Ray Durski, Retired South Amboy Police Detective Sgt. "I knew Joe a long time as a friend and judge. He was always there for you, no matter what time of the day we needed a search warrant, he was there. As a friend, all he talked about was catching killies, fishing and the family. What a shame. He was a real nice guy and will be missed."

Rich Johnson "We used to say hello to him everyday by the Water Works. His favorite spot was down by the pond. He was a very nice guy."

Kathy O'Grady "We both enjoyed gardening, and every spring, we couldn't wait to speak to each other about what we were planning to do with our gardens. We'd touch base throughout the season and talk about our flowers."



**Mary LaVerne O'Leary**

## MARY RITA - MISSED IT BY THAT MUCH

By Henny "the DJ" Conroy

Tommy Burkard asked me to write something remembering Mary Rita, but since I'd already written twice about her upbeat personality and her ability to bring out the fun in people, I didn't think I could add anything else, but then I remembered the Mary Rita I knew from when she was a student of mine at Saint Mary's High School in the Fall of 1964.

I still remember in the very early days of that first year my making some gaffe that was goofy enough to bring the instruction to an embarrassing, screeching halt. What it was, I don't know? Was it mixing up the facts in a lecture, was it writing something nonsensical on the board, was it pointing on the map to Berlin, New Jersey instead of Berlin, Deutschland? Who knows? And to tell you the truth it doesn't really matter. What does matter is that making a mistake is the best thing a high school teacher can do sometimes, because reacting to that mistake in an honest, human way can help students

deal with their own errors in a more accepting way and give them the courage to take chances. Of course, the worst thing is to become defensive and make it appear not ok to be wrong once in a while.

So here I am pointing to Paris, Kentucky instead of Paris, France and as the class watches for my reaction and as I'm sweating blood with embarrassment, I look over at Mary Rita and she shrugs her shoulders like it wasn't such a big deal. In the brief moment that Mary Rita had given me to relax, I thought of the popular show at the time, Get Smart, Agent 86, and I blurted out one of his catch phrases, "Missed it by that much!" The class howls at my joke, I make the correction, class moves on, the world doesn't end, catastrophe avoided, lesson learned.

The only regret I have is that I didn't thank Mary Rita for what she did for me that day while I could.



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