



# A treasured elder...

## Joseph Lee Duncan

Longtime city father has Tampa in his blood

Treasure  
Our  
Elders

“The people,” is Lee Duncan’s ready answer when asked what makes Tampa a great city, and he should know. Duncan spent 36 years as a Tampa City Councilman and helped shape the development of the thriving city it is today, Florida’s third largest (behind Jacksonville-Duval County and Miami). Even as he approaches age 90, Duncan has a near-perfect recall of Tampa people, places and events and remains an unabashed civic booster. “We never had the racial unrest some cities had because Tampa has always had a mix of ethnicities – Sicilians, Cuban, Italian, Spanish,” he counted. “Crackers too.”

### Early years

Duncan was born near Moultrie, Georgia and was only four years old when he and his mother moved to Tampa following her divorce. The city already had a thriving cigar industry whose workers were strongly unionized and supported by a network of ethnic social clubs. His stepfather operated the Casino, Royal and Ritz movie theaters in and near Ybor City and Duncan literally grew up in them, working as a janitor, an usher, a doorman and assistant manager. When he was a senior at Hillsborough High School he met his future wife, Anna, a dark-eyed Mediterranean beauty. Both graduated from the University of Tampa and were married in January 1946.

By the early 1950s, television and drive-in movies began to spell the end for the great downtown movie palaces, and one by one they began to close. Duncan and his wife went into the property-casualty insurance business and operated the Airdrome Grill downtown, where local politics was a constant topic of discussion. “One day somebody asked me why I didn’t run,” Duncan said. “I thought about it and decided to do it.” Anna found out by reading it in the newspaper the next day.

### Campaigning, serving

During the hot summer of 1951, Anna was pregnant with daughter Anna Lee, but didn’t let it slow her down as she and Duncan campaigned throughout Tampa’s many neighborhoods. A non-stop succession of spaghetti dinners, park picnics, candidate parties and ice cream socials were how local campaigns were conducted in the days before



Lee Duncan, in traditional guayaberra shirt, and devoted wife Anna have been married 61 years. The couple celebrates each anniversary by having hot dogs for breakfast, the very first meal they shared as man and wife. At right, Councilman Lee Duncan during a 1971 meeting and the historic downtown Tampa Theater marquee.



photo courtesy Tampa Tribune



television and the Internet, and Duncan’s outgoing style made him a natural. He won the election and would go on to win successive re-election campaigns, three times running unopposed. After nearly four decades in office, Duncan announced just as unexpectedly that he wouldn’t seek re-election. “I had already announced and raised money, but I got up one day and decided not to. The next day I told the Mayor. Every penny (of campaign contributions) I gave back.” As a private citizen Duncan continued to build his insurance business, fly as a private pilot and serve as an “institutional memory” for subsequent Tampa City Councils.

### Making his mark

Listing Duncan’s many honors and accomplishments in office would literally take pages, but longtime state and local institutions like the Tampa Sports Authority, Florida Fair Board, Hillsborough Muscular Dystrophy Association, Florida League of Cities, the Sister Cities International program (Tampa now has nine) and the Gasparilla Festival bear his imprint. One of his most noteworthy successes was leading an effort to restore and

preserve the historic and elegant Tampa Theater, the city’s first air conditioned building and the last of the great downtown theaters. “There’s no single legacy,” he replied with characteristic humility. “We accomplished so much.”

Duncan fractured a hip in November of last year, so now he holds court in a private room at Habana Health Care Center, not far from where he grew up. His health is otherwise remarkably good and he takes few medications, save for the eyedrops he needs for a persistent vision difficulty. Anna visits daily (“She’s in good company every day,” jokes Duncan) and both praise the staff and care at the 150-bed facility whose administrator is Bob Murphy. Duncan remains active in the political process and had just finished filling out his absentee ballot when the Treasure Our Elders interviewer arrived.

“I never said I would do anything I could not do,” Duncan said when asked about his political style and philosophy. “I always made a point of reaching out to work with people even if I didn’t always agree with them.”

FHCA honors Joseph Lee Duncan and treasures his many contributions to Tampa, our state and nation.