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'Harp' Donnelly, ex-mayor, dies



David Hansen/Daily News file photo
Humphrey 'Harp' Donnelly III, shown in December 1996, died today from cancer.

By James J. Gillis
Daily News staff

NEWPORT — Former Mayor Humphrey J. Donnelly III, who led the city through a decade of disaster and revitalization, died this morning at his Bateman Avenue home after a long fight with cancer.

He was 66.

Known as "Harp," Donnelly was a colorful and flamboyant mayor from 1971 to 1981, during a time when the city lost its naval fleet and jazz festival and bounced back strongly with tourism.

"He was an old-fashioned mayor from the old school," Providence Mayor Vincent A. Cianci said this morning. "He was very loyal to his city and very loyal to his friends."

'He (Donnelly) was very loyal to his city and very loyal to his friends.'

— Vincent A. Cianci
Providence mayor

Cianci took office in Providence while Donnelly served in Newport, and the two became friendly, with Cianci often shipping out-of-town visitors to Newport to meet Donnelly and see the city.

"He certainly was a good friend to me," Cianci said. "He certainly will be

missed."

A native Newporter, Donnelly grew up following local politics and entered the arena himself in 1969, with a run for City Council. Two years later, he took the mayor's seat.

In an interview last June, Donnelly joked how a gust of wind almost kept him out of office. Donnelly, who worked in maintenance at the Newport Electric Corp., felt a working guy should have a voice in city business.

But Donnelly hesitated to run. "I picked up a form at City Hall and was driving home down Mann Avenue, which was two ways then, and the paper blew out the window.

"I wondered, 'Shall I pick it up or just forget it?' Thankfully, I got out and picked it up."

Friends say Donnelly owned a quick Irish wit, quick with a snappy — but never hurtful — reply.

Kathy Silvia, secretary to the city manager, learned of Donnelly's death this morning.

"I will miss Harp very much," Silvia said. "He was a wonderful person. The thing is, I never heard him say a bad thing about anybody. He would disagree with people on issues, but it never went beyond that. He was fun to work with. He had a wonderful sense of humor."

Donnelly, survived by his wife, Barbara, and six children, became ill last year. The word spread quickly throughout Newport. That February,

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