

New Bedford Spotlight: Joe Jesus



by Edward
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The New Bedford Crawler Series: New Bedford as seen by the people who live and work there.

When Joe Jesus walks into the Shawmut Diner, he is welcomed like a soldier returning home. As he passes through the front doors he immediately gets a “Hi Joe!” from both of the waitresses. Once in the diner, he is recognized by other customers and greeted by them as well. He sits down amidst the smell of fresh French fries for our interview.

You might recognize Joe as well if you attended one of the “Joe Jesus 50’s Nights” in downtown New Bedford that he has held for the past 20 years. If you were downtown for this year’s event he was hard to miss as he looked a lot like Elvis. Joe tells me that he had many requests for photos. He notes that he needed a good deal of black hair dye to play the part.

“It is a strictly family-oriented event,” chimes Joe. “No booze, no wine at all. We had dancers on the street.”

It’s obvious that Joe Jesus enjoys people. He must also trust them as well.

“If you do something for yourself, you can be let down.” Says

Joe. "When you do it for everyone, God is not going to let everyone down."



Joe started his work life as a car salesman for Ashley Ford. He dresses sharp, like you might expect a salesman to. His white hair would make him appear to be in his sixties perhaps. Joe is an "everyone's friend" kind of guy. I think that I would have bought a car from him.

When Mustangs were produced in 1965, Joe started a Mustang Club, but there was so much interest in cars that he had to change it to a sports car club. Then came a time that would test his influence. In the sixties, drag racing became popular and there were numbers of complaints about "hot-roders" racing on Shawmut Avenue and Route 140. Joe talked to City Counselors at the time David Nelson, Mike Merrolla and Mayor George Rogers, and convinced them to organize racing by creating a legal venue for it at the industrial park.

"I formed a club called the New Bedford Performance Enthusiasts," claims Joe, "and on Sunday afternoons we would all race at the industrial park. The crowd was so big that they asked me to bring it some place else. I said yes, so the following year we went to North Terminal down by the waterfront. It just got too big though. Parties were coming from out of town and out-of-state so we just had to stop. It was just too big for the area. We did one year at the North terminal but it was just too much with the crowds, the cars and the police with their dogs and the "Jaws of Life."

"Reach for something within reach and you accomplish nothing," says Joe. "Reach for something out of reach and you'll accomplish something. When you stay involved with many things, it keeps you going."

One of Joe's most interesting story is about his peanut shop and how he became successful with it.

"I bought the Bristol Building in 1978, and I owned a peanut shop. Everybody loved the peanut shop talked about it" says Joe. "We turned on the roasters at 10 a.m. The aroma was all over the street. The high school was at the top of the hill on County Street. The kids would come from school and they would catch the bus on Purchase Street at either Cherry's or Merchant's Bank. Both were close to the peanut shop. The "Peanut Man" would sometimes give peanuts to the kids. At Christmas time I would buy one pound tins. By the time all of the doctors, lawyers and businessmen had bought a tin for their secretaries, we would have sold thousands of them. Not just in New Bedford, but all over the area. At one time I had three shops, but it was too difficult to keep up with them all."

All of the above might seem to explain Joe's huge success at selling peanuts. But Joe also said that he put the peanut roaster in the window and placed a fan under the roaster that blew air out through a vent.

"To keep the roaster cool," I ask?

"No, to make sure the aroma went out into the street."

Joe retired from the peanut shop eight years ago. The building is now owned by No Problemo Taqueria, which has expanded to two rooms.

Joe also describes a restaurant he ran from 1979 to 1984 with a romantic flair. "Jonad's was a very elegant Victorian restaurant," says Joe. "We had 15 waiters, most from SMU. They were all dressed in tuxedos. You could come in with your wife and sit in one of the love seats. The waiters would come up and ask your favorite song and sing it to you."

At times when he is alone, Joe Jesus looks in the mirror. He wants to convince himself that he is heading in the right direction with his projects, such as the 50's Night. To his reflection, he says: "Hey, I'm going to do this."



He wants to find out if his reflection will agree with him. Only occasionally has his reflection disagreed.

Our conversation returns to Joe's 50's Night, which Joe started in 1991. Before Joe's 50's Night, the United Way ran a smaller 50's night in the Bank of America parking lot until they decided to cease organizing the event.

"I don't ask our vendors (he means the commercial ones) for a fee, I ask them for a percentage of what they make. I don't say what the percentage is, because everybody deals out of their heart. I just feel that there are more good people out there than there are bad."

Joe's 50's nights happen each year on the third Thursday in July with a rain date of the third Thursday in August. Non-profits can vend what they choose and keep what they sell.

"I like the money to stay local" says Joe.



Joe is very pleased with the 50's Nights of the past few years. More and more women and young girls have been showing up in poodle skirts. Slowly, even the men have been donning 50's garb, such as T-Shirts and Jeans. Women can rent or buy the skirts from Eleane's T-

Shirts on Purchase Street.

Victor Ponseita brings about 40 adults to the event. Victor and company practice their jitterbug maybe 5 to 6 weeks in preparation for the 50's Night. Cheryl McCormac's Dance Studio performs "Happy Days" dancing. The student's ages range between 5 and 16.

"People can get on a trolley that runs up and down Union Street," says Joe. "They get off of the trolley, the music is playing and the dancers are dancing. They do the Stroll and the Jitterbug – and the exciting part is, they get all of the people involved that are just standing around."

Many others help with the event. This year, the Firefighters Local 841 sold hot dogs for the Neediest Family Fund, The Salvation army and The Orpheum Theater. Performers and sponsors all have their spots downtown including Johnny Angel, a DJ; Sparkle (DJ), The Voyage (band); Bob Bramwell and Cuz's Car Club; Russ Peterson (DJ); The Klassics (band); Joe Barklay and the Corvette Car Club; Pat Mello as "The Jazzy Lady" and the Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts.

Butch Remos, according to Joe, has the hardest job. He parks the classic cars.

"They all do a tremendous job," says Joe. "More and more people get involved each year. Local cables Channel 18 and videographer George Oliviera do a fantastic job at covering

the event. "

The event has benefited many organizations through the years including The United Way, Muscular Dystrophy, Make a Wish and the Veterans Transition House.

Joe has tried running the 50's Night in previous years by committee, but he found that this method became too much of a mess. "I'm a one-man band," Joe says. He is more comfortable running the event himself and allowing performer, vendor or club manager to run their own part of the event.

Joe Jesus has had to work through some major setbacks. His daughter Valerie passed away in 1990 and this past year his wife passed away as well from lung disease. Joe still held his yearly event, but canceled a planned repeat event on August 21st. "It was too much," says Joe. He still uses the graphics designed by his daughter to promote the 50's Night.

Along with Joe, Joe's wife ran a Victorian Christmas Caroling and Hayride event at the Campbell School while she was alive.

During our interview, Joe gets up to take a cell phone call. He insists that I finish my hamburger. I easily oblige. It is a surprisingly good hamburger for a diner. The call is from Phil Paleologos. Phil has a daily program on local radio WBSM and owns the Shawmut Diner. Joe and Phil do a 50's radio show together on Wednesday mornings at 10 a.m. called "Down Memory Lane."

Joe hands the phone to me. Phil wants people to know about the upcoming benefit at the Council on Aging in Acushnet (59 1/2 South Main Street). He says it will be called "Lincoln Park Remembered" and will be held over the Labor Day weekend. Phil describes what Joe will be wearing when he sits for the dunk tank at the benefit. I think that this might be news to Joe. Especially the speedo.



By about 2 p.m. Joe and I are the only customers left in the diner. A lanky young man appears at the door, looking inquisitive. He looks at me, probably assuming that I am the younger of the two. His rare '93 Honda Del Sol is parked outside, right next to Joe's.

The discovery of a matching car has made his day. We get up to take a look at the cars. The young man has taken the convertible top off of his on this sunny day: it neatly fits in the trunk.

"You never see other people with these," says Joe. "They were only made in '93 and '94. Every time I go out with it, some young guy wants to buy it from me."

"Be ready when the flow comes to you," says Joe.

The day after our interview, I listened to Joe and Phil's radio show. Phil posed a humorous question to Joe about Joe himself: "When Joe Jesus lands in the dunk tank, how many hairs on his head will be out of place?"

Joe laughs and replies without hesitation, "Not a single one."

50's Night New Bedford Image gallery

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