



John Thomas Hardin

June 5, 1931 - November 27, 2018

John Thomas Hardin, 87, beloved husband, father, grandfather and friend, peacefully passed away on Tuesday, November 27, 2018 while surrounded by his loving family. He was born on June 5, 1931 in Birmingham, Alabama to Samuel Hardin and Hester Moore. He left home at the age of 14 to start a career in telecommunications with Bell Telephone in New Orleans, joined the Air Force at the age of 17 and served his country as a Staff Sergeant in the Korean War. After the war, he returned home and earned his degree in Electrical engineering from the Milwaukee School of Engineering.

While attending school in Milwaukee, he met the love of his life, Mary Grace Eannelli, and immediately became an honorary Italian in her family. Upon graduation, he accepted a job with RCA Communications, working on test missions for the U.S. Government in the Caribbean Islands. He and Mary Grace married on April 14, 1956 in Lakeland and made it their forever home. He opened his first business in Lakeland, Big Boy Drive-in and Coin Laundry, with his father-in-law on the corner of W. 5th St. and N. Ohio Ave. in the late 50's and later added a mobile sandwich truck, offering homemade food to workers at area construction sites. Not one to sit still, and always having an eye toward meeting people's need to eat, he opened P.J.'s Drive-in on South Florida Ave., selling the area's best burgers, roast beef sandwiches, onion rings, French fries, sodas, and milkshakes complete with car hops and a juke box. It was there that he established the first restaurant drive-through window in Lakeland and employed just about every local high schooler at some point

in time. He later established a chain of fast food restaurants—Poppa Jay’s—throughout Central Florida, specializing in Fried Chicken and Backyard Burgers, and offering the first all-you-can eat chicken and salad bar in the Lakeland area. In addition to his chain of restaurants, he was a distributor for several nationally recognized commercial restaurant equipment manufacturers.

His never-ending thirst for knowledge and learning led him to take night classes in business at Florida Southern College, beginning a legacy at FSC carried on by his children and grandchildren and fueling his desire to provide his family with as much formal education as they desired.

Throughout his life, from his humble beginnings as a paper boy in Alabama to his final days on earth, he was the consummate gentleman who always saw the good in others no matter who they were or where they came from. He never saw color, he never saw wealth, he only saw people, especially the underdog.

The only thing that rivaled his passion for business was his love for his family, which was always the center of his life, whether it was attending dance and piano recitals, school performances, and sporting events for his children and grandchildren or hosting graduation parties and holiday dinners.

His wonderful sense of humor, love for singing around the house, and zest for life will be forever etched into the hearts of those he leaves behind.

He is survived by his daughters, Tina Marie Hardin Tebo (David) and Cindy Ann Hardin-Pilka (Dan); and his grandsons, Jonathan Tebo Hardin, Christopher Tebo Hardin, Joey Pilka and Alex Pilka. He was preceded in death by his wife of 61 years, Mary Grace Eannelli Hardin, his mother, Hester Moore Ward, his father, Samuel Odric Hardin, his father-in-law, Paul Eannelli, his mother-in-law, Vincenza Foti Eannelli, his brothers, O.C. Hardin and Samuel Hardin, and his sister Ruth Downs.

Visitation will be on Tuesday, Dec. 4, 2018, 6:00 p.m.-8:00 p.m. at Gentry Morrison Funeral Home, Southside Chapel, 1727 Bartow Rd., Lakeland, FL. A party to celebrate John’s life will be held on Dec. 15, 2018, 6:30-10:30 p.m. at

St. Joseph Academy, 310 Frank Lloyd Wright Way, Lakeland, FL. In lieu of flowers, contributions may be made to St. Joseph Academy, Lakeland or Santa Fe Catholic High School, 3110 E. Hwy 92, Lakeland.

Cemetery Details

Lakeland Memorial Gardens

2125 Bartow Rd
Lakeland, FL 33801

Previous Events

Visitation

DEC 4. 6:00 PM - 7:00 PM (ET)

Gentry-Morrison Funeral Homes - Southside Chapel
1727 Bartow Road
Lakeland, FL 33801
(863) 688-7679
t.hall@gentry-morrison.com
<https://www.gentry-morrison.com/>

Funeral Service

DEC 4. 7:00 PM (ET)

Gentry-Morrison Funeral Homes - Southside Chapel
1727 Bartow Road
Lakeland, FL 33801
(863) 688-7679
t.hall@gentry-morrison.com
<https://www.gentry-morrison.com/>

Tribute Wall



“ Gentry-Morrison Funeral Homes created a Tribute Video in memory of John Thomas Hardin



Gentry-Morrison Funeral Homes - December 03, 2018 at 02:06 PM

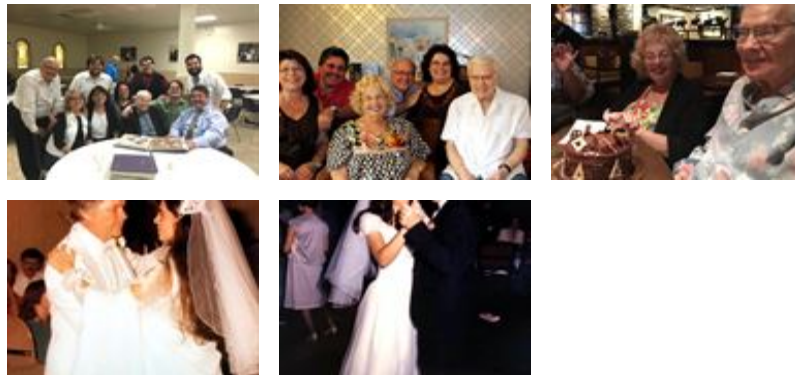


“ John Thomas Hardin

November 17, 2022 at 10:14 AM



“ 60 files added to the album Life Tributes



Gentry-Morrison Funeral Homes - December 03, 2018 at 12:39 PM

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“ Tina, Cindy, and family,
Johnny was such a wonderful man. My
memories of his warm smile will never end.
Each time he greeted us, there was always a
smile from ear to ear. He made me feel so
welcome and loved. I remember all the times we spent together at
our family homes, and the entire family Christmas gatherings. So so
thankful for the memories, and blessings of the Eannelli, Mortl,
Hardin, Corby families.
May Jesus hold you all close during this most difficult time. My
prayers remain constant.
Love you all, Luann



Luann Corby - December 01, 2018 at 07:04 PM