

James D. Griffin, Buffalo's 56th mayor

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Feisty, independent, irascible at times — Jimmy Griffin was as familiar a figure as the city has ever known.

"You don't have to be a genius to be a mayor — or anything else," the city's 56th mayor once said, describing himself as "honest and down-to-earth. I like to think I have a sense of humor — and common sense."

Never far from the public eye, the man who told his constituents during the Blizzard of '85 to grab a six-pack and stay indoors spent his last years opposing the city's garbage tax, playing handball, writing a column for the Metro Community News — and playing golf all over Buffalo and nearby Canada with family and friends.

He also harbored a few longtime grudges, including one against The Buffalo News and its reporters.

"When I don't like people, they know it!" he said.

James Donald Griffin, a master of the one-liner, was born and grew up in South Buffalo's Old First Ward in 1929 — an Irish conclave that both shaped his thinking and held his heart for life.

That is where as a boy in the Depression era he hauled potatoes from the old Elk Street Market; where he attended St. Brigid's Elementary School, and where he first campaigned for public office in the 1950s, building a loyal political base.

Griffin, whose paternal grandfather hailed from Ireland's County Clare, dropped out of high school to work in feed mills and grain elevators on the city's waterfront — but soon returned, graduating from Our Lady of Victory High School in Lackawanna in 1948.

He saw action in Korea as a paratrooper and ranger in the Army during the Korean Conflict, leaving the military as a first lieutenant. He received an associate's degree in metallurgical technology from the Erie County Technical Institute, now Erie Community College, in 1958.

He was an engineer on the Buffalo Creek Railroad; a co-partner in the Duffy-Griffin Insurance business, and owner-operator of Hagen's Tavern for five years before making his first successful bid for public office, in the early 1960s.

Griffin served as a Buffalo Common Council member, representing the Ellicott District, from Jan. 1, 1962, to Dec. 31, 1965. He was a state senator for 11 years before running for mayor in 1977, on the Conservative line.

He won — the first man to do so on the Conservative line alone.

On Jan. 1, 1978, Buffalo's Griffin Era began.

"The city was \$19 million in debt; the waterfront a wilderness; downtown deserted; neighborhoods were deteriorating and residents were leaving, and business and industry had no confidence in our city," Griffin later recalled.

For 16 years, love him or not, Griffin gave all his efforts to Buffalo — eradicating the debt, and seeing the Buffalo Hilton (now the Adam's Mark), town houses and office buildings, including a new headquarters for Western New York Public Broadcasting, spring up by the waterfront.

Downtown and the Theater District got the Hyatt Regency, an eight-screen General Cinema in the Market Arcade, TGI Friday's and a Rotary Ice Rink — not to mention three bank office buildings at Fountain Plaza.

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Shea's Buffalo was restored. Hoyt Lake in Delaware Park was cleaned up. New parking ramps and walkways were built, as were the HSBC Bank Atrium, City Center and the Elm-Oak high-tech corridor. A new City Mission and Cornerstone Manor were built.

But the crowning glory was undoubtedly Dunn Tire Park (nee Pilot Field).

Griffin not only rallied community leaders to bring professional baseball back to Buffalo in 1979 but he spearheaded construction of downtown's Pilot Field, one of the finest baseball stadiums in the nation.

At the Bisons' season finale in 1993, the baseball club and the Rich family presented Griffin with a crystal buffalo in appreciation for his continuing support.

"This job is a great job," Griffin said earlier that year — when he decided not to seek a fifth term after polls reported he would lose badly.

"We are able to help people," he said. "We help build homes, create jobs in the private sector, fill jobs, both permanent and seasonal, in city government, and also provide summer work for thousands of kids so they can earn money for school and clothes and have a few bucks for some fun times."

Griffin took risks. He went after federal and state funding with a vengeance. He fought for Buffalo at every turn. But some say his mayoralty produced more failures than accomplishments.

Crime went up. The city's population continued to decline. Several downtown department stores closed their doors.

The city's public schools were said to be under-funded during the Griffin years — while the mayor's own children attended Catholic schools. The city's Police Department was politicized.

Two thousand homes were built and many neighborhood business districts revitalized, but the city's East Side neighborhoods, with notable exceptions, were largely neglected. There were few minority employees in key city positions.

Taxes were raised only an average of 3.6 percent a year, and the city's work force was slashed by more than 1,000 employees — leaving, many felt, too few workers to get the job done right.

And the Griffin administration was not without scandal.

Griffin's parks commissioner, Robert Delano, was jailed after an FBI probe of the city's Parks Department brought five convictions. The mayor's own brother, Tommy, was convicted and jailed on a tax-fraud charge in Florida.

David May was an assistant city registrar during the Griffin administration when as much as \$746,000 in public funds disappeared.

Three years after Griffin left office, the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development asked the city to return a \$400,000 block grant made, despite significant irregularities in processing, during the Griffin era to a developer for a project that was never completed.

"Griffin's record is like a long shadow," News columnist and former political reporter George Borrelli wrote in 1997. "Try as he may, he just can't run away from it."

Longtime Griffin supporter and close friend Ronald J. Anthony begged to differ:

"Mayor Griffin always ran on his record and he won on his record. Victories in 1977, 1981, 1985 and 1989 proved that those who count the most, the voters, liked that record," Anthony said. "In my eyes, and in the eyes of countless Western New Yorkers, there will always be only one mayor — Jim Griffin."

Over the years, Griffin had the endorsements of different political parties — Conservative when he ran for mayor in 1977; Democrat, Republican, Conservative and Right to Life when he ran in 1981; Republican, Conservative and RTL in 1985; all four in 1989, and RTL in 1997.

His chief opponents were — in 1977, former Deputy Assembly Speaker Arthur O. Eve and Buffalo attorney John J. Phelan; in 1981, former Delaware Council Member Alfred T. Coppola; in 1985, former Common Council President George K. Arthur; in 1989, the late Assemblyman William B. Hoyt, and, in 1997, former Mayor Anthony M. Masiello and former Common Council President James W. Pitts.

He lost his bid for county executive in 1991 on the Republican line, as well as efforts in 1975 and 2007.

Griffin, as mayor, had idols — Harry S. Truman and Abraham Lincoln. His favorite TV show was "Cheers." His home number was always listed in the Buffalo phone book.

An anti-abortion poster hung in his mayoral chambers. He welcomed Randall Terry's Operation Rescue to Buffalo in 1992. He openly ridiculed lesbians and gays, calling them "fruits."

He was a scrapper. He came out fighting when Buffalo artist Billie Lawless's famous "Green Lightning" neon sculpture went up on Urban Renewal Agency land off the Elm-Oak Arterial in 1984.

Griffin had the sculpture, which was clearly phallic, dismantled five days after it was unveiled.

And Griffin also fought with his fists — including a celebrated run-in reported by former Erie County Parks Commissioner Joseph X. Martin who claimed the mayor sucker-punched him after he said hello outside the downtown ballpark in 1988.

Even after serving four terms as mayor, Griffin re-entered politics on several occasions. He ran again for mayor in 1997, for the Assembly in 1998, and for one more successful effort for the South Park Council seat in 2003.

He even ran for president against Bill Clinton in New Hampshire's 1996 Democratic primary. And in 2007, he fired up his campaign organization one last time to run for county executive, garnering a strong 22 percent of the Democratic primary vote.

One of the most colorful political figures in the city's history, Griffin was married in 1968 to the former Margaret McMahan, the woman he fondly called "Margie."

The couple had three children — Maureen, Megan and Thomas. They lived on Dorrance Avenue, at the South Buffalo-Lackawanna line.

Griffin also owned a condominium in North Miami Beach and a cottage in Crystal Beach, Ont., along the near Canadian shore.

A longtime member of St. Martin's Catholic Church, he was a Buffalo News Outstanding Citizen in the early 1980s,

Survivors besides his wife and three children include brothers Thomas and Joseph, and a sister, Donna Gasuik.

Funeral services are incomplete.

— Karen Brady

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