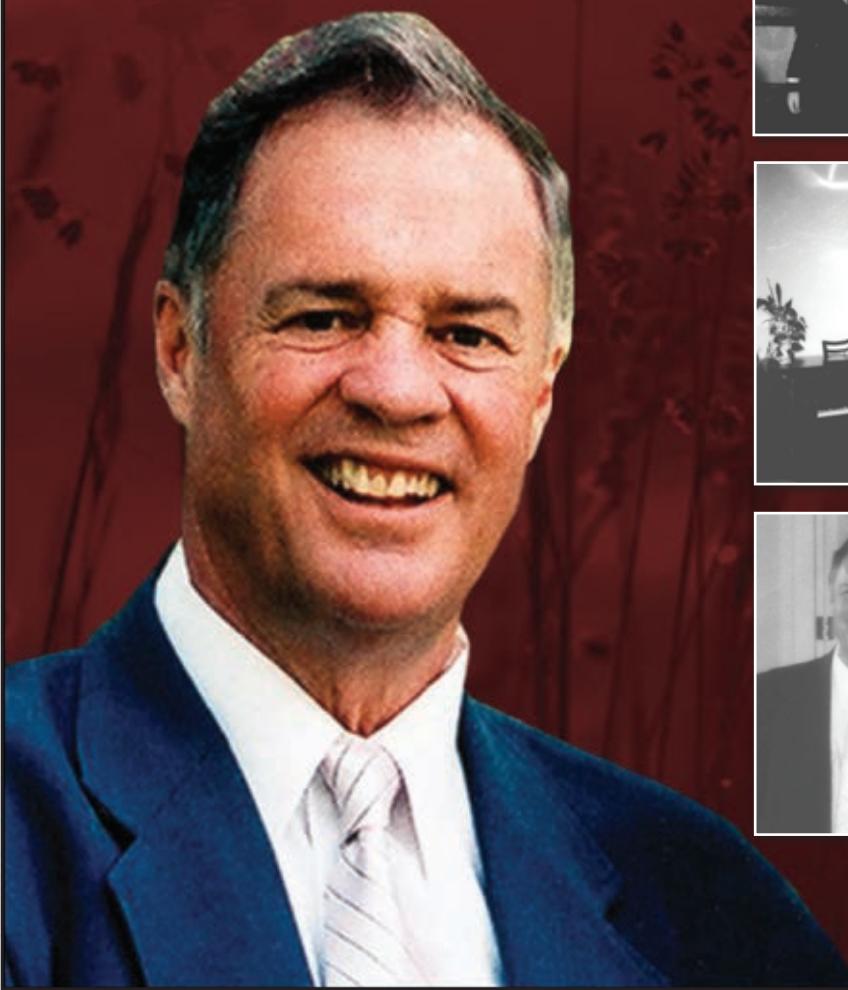


# Donald **Neal**

June 2, 1936 - March 15, 2013





## *Don's Life Story*

All who knew Don Neal would agree that he lived a life worth praise and celebration. He was truly one of a kind - a gifted musician, an inspiring coach, and a devoted family man. Don Neal accomplished so much of which to be proud, yet his greatest legacy is found in the children and grandchildren he loved more than life itself. Through his life we are reminded to follow our dreams and to pursue that which brings us true happiness rather than simply pursue great reward. Equipped with a quick wit and gentle words, Don was a coach who changed lives, whether in an official role or in sharing timeless and heartfelt wisdom with his family. He will be dearly missed while his memory is forever cherished.

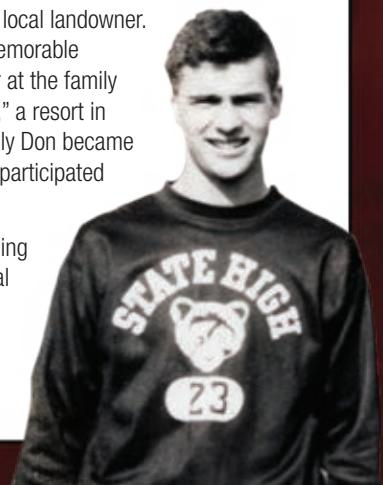
The 1930s were some of the most trying days our nation has seen, as the entire decade was cloaked in the hardship of the Great Depression. With a soaring unemployment rate, jobs became scarce, which left countless families doing whatever they could to make ends meet. Despite the trying times around them, a young couple from Kalamazoo, Michigan, was delighted with the birth of their baby boy on June 2, 1936. It was at Borgess Hospital that Lawrence and Agnes (Winslow) Neal welcomed their son, Donald B., into the world, but he was often known as Benny after the great Benny Goodman. Raised in the family home alongside his younger brother, Jim, and younger sister, Nancy, Benny and his family moved around quite a bit as his

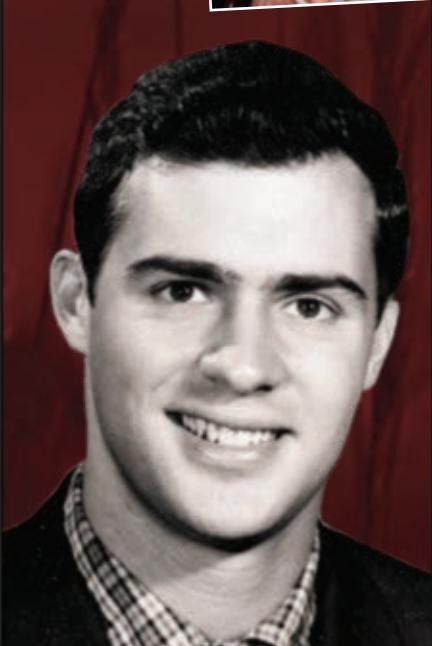
Dad worked as a sales representative for Gibson Guitar.

Prior to his sales job, Don's father played on Vaudeville with George Burns. His mother established the first women's exercise classes in Kalamazoo and also worked for Kelly Services. It was after living in White Plains, New York, and Iowa that the Neal family settled into their home on Woodward Avenue, which was originally called Winslow Avenue after Don's maternal grandfather who was a local landowner.

As a family they took memorable vacations every summer at the family cottage in "Cold Springs," a resort in Hamilton, Indiana. Eventually Don became a lifeguard, performed as a musician, and participated in water ski shows there.

In many ways Don experienced an upbringing that was reflective of the times. His musical talents took root as a young boy as Don sang in the children's choir at St. Luke's, and in the fifth grade, he took up the trombone. When he was in high school,





he had already started a band, Don Neal Dance Band, playing Glenn Miller. As a student at State High School in Kalamazoo, he also played basketball, ran track and cross country, and he played tennis as well. In fact, Don went all the way to state in tennis. By the time he graduated, he had nine varsity letters under his belt. From there Don went on to Knox College in Illinois, and he finished his studies at Western Michigan University. His dance band continued on to college and was well accepted, too. The college paper wrote that graduate, Don Neal, would be the only graduate to take a pay cut when graduating due to the continued success of his dance band. He completed his master's degree as a reading specialist. In his early twenties Don also traveled on the road with the Blue Baron Band.

After graduating from college, Don began teaching English and social studies at Portage Central Junior High School. This also marked the beginning of his long and successful career as a basketball and golf coach. Don also formed the middle school tennis program. His teaching career spanned eight years,

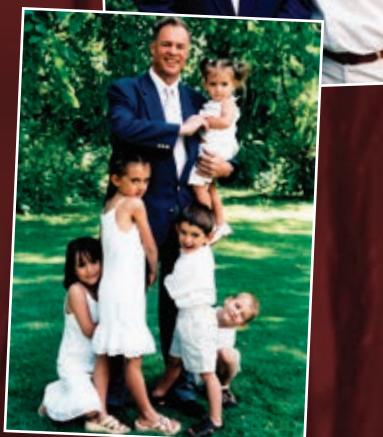
but he always had an additional two to three jobs including selling shoes at Bells, and of course, leading his band. When he left the teaching industry, Don began selling textbooks for Holt Rinehart and Winston.

While he was busy going to school and establishing his career, Don met and married Shirley Cronk with whom he had a son, Doug Neal. Although their marriage ended in divorce, Don was forever grateful for the son they shared.

In 1961 Don married Dottie Kubizna, and together they were blessed with two children, Jamie and Ben. In 1969 the couple opened Don Neal's Mr. T-Bone Restaurant and Nightclub in downtown Kalamazoo, which was one of the first nightclubs in Kalamazoo. It was there that his band, the Neal Collection, started. In addition to performances from his own band, Don brought in big name entertainment like Count Basie, Glenn

Miller Orchestra, Ray Charles, Frank Sinatra Jr., Four Freshman, Harry James Orchestra, Tommy Dorsey Orchestra, Woody Woodbury, Judy Bryte, Chubby Checker, Stan Kenton Orchestra, Duke Ellington Orchestra, Woody Herman and the Thundering Herd, Peter Nero, Chase, and drummer Buddy Rich. As the trombone player and MC, he and the Neal Collection also recorded three albums. Don and Dottie later divorced, yet his music career kept on ticking. This career spanned his entire life, with him as the band leader most of the time. Don was a lively and vibrant MC who played his last dance gig just this past December.





Throughout his journey, Don's life was enriched by numerous activities in addition to his music. He loved coaching, including being an assistant coach for his son, Ben, at Portage Northern and Central. During Don's later years he rekindled his lifetime love of tennis and golf, and he also enjoyed playing gin rummy. A lifelong music enthusiast, he loved listening to big band music, both live and recorded. With his beloved companion Christy of the past nine years, Don enjoyed playing cards, dancing, and going to the movies. His sunset years also brought

Don five grandchildren, Hannah, Sammy, Emma, Bailey, and Trey, and he loved playing with them as often as time allowed. Of course, he was filled with plenty of stories and jokes for his grandchildren. Las Vegas was among Don's favorite places to visit, and the Neal Collection brought him there several times through the years. His final trip to Vegas was with his daughter, Jamie, and her husband, Dustin, and his son, Ben, this past September where they enjoyed a few great shows, and Don was able to sit down at a card table once again to beat the odds.

A blessing in the lives of many, Don Neal was engaging, witty, and fun-loving all rolled into one. He told the best stories and could make us laugh with the best of them - even as his health was in decline. Don cherished his friends and loved ones above all else and never hesitated to offer his sage advice. The memories he leaves behind will be treasures in the hearts and lives of his family and friends for generations to come.

Don Neal of Portage died March 15, 2013. Don's family includes his longtime companion, Christy Lamson; children, Doug Neal, Jamie (Dustin) Epstein and Ben (Jenny) Neal; grandchildren, Hannah, Sammy and Emma Epstein, Bailey and Trey Neal, Zac, Luc, and Cam Luyckx; and sister, Nancy (Guy) Hess as well as many other relatives. Visit with his family, view his life story film and share light refreshments on Monday from 4:00-7:00 at Betzler Life Story Funeral Home, Kalamazoo; 6080 Stadium Dr. (375-2900) where a memorial service will be held on Tuesday at 11:00 a.m.; lunch and jam session to follow. Please visit [www.lifestorynet.com](http://www.lifestorynet.com) where you can archive a memory or photo or sign his online memory book.

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