



Mourning becomes eclectic

Jimmy Buffet fans pay tribute to the #1 Parrot Head at Bibber Memorial Chapel

by Valerie Marier

Doug Bibber was looking forward to Labor Day Weekend. A long rainy summer here in Maine had finally yielded to blue skies and balmy temperatures. The vice president of Kennebunk's Bibber Memorial Chapel was also happily anticipating a fun outing in New Hampshire where he and his wife Robin were meeting friends for a concert. But at 6 AM that Friday, his iPhone pinged with a sad message from his son: "Dad, Jimmy is dead."

Bibber knew immediately who "Jimmy" was.

Years prior, at age 19, Bibber had taken his then-girlfriend Robin to their first Jimmy Buffet concert in Old Orchard Beach. They got hooked on tropical rock and, in later decades, the couple drove to Bangor and Mansfield, Massachusetts, among many other locales, to hear their favorite crooner.

Within minutes, Bibber set to work planning a service. He recalled, "First thing I did was write a post for the obituary section of the *Maine Sunday Telegram*. It read: "James William Buffet, Dec. 25, 1946-September 1, 2023. Celebration of Life Announcement: With the sad news of the passing of Jimmy Buffet on September 1, 2023, Bibber Memorial Chapel is extending an Invitation for Parrot Heads in Southern Maine. . ."

Since Buffet's performances were exclusively held on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, Bibber arranged for Jimmy's celebration of life gatherings for those same days at the mortuary: "Tuesday / Thursdays: 9-4; Saturday: 9-1." Bibber also extended a warm welcome to neighbors and friends "to come and sign a book which we will endeavor to send to his family, letting them know of our love and support from this corner of Margaritaville."

Several of the 125 mourners roared into the parking lot on their Harleys. One father and daughter drove down from Cumberland and met their son who motored up from Connecticut. They knew they were at the right place when they spotted a mannequin dressed in a colorful tropical shirt, topped with a red parrot head, situated outside the mortuary's front door.

Inside the stately Second Empire Mansard-style funeral home on Summer Street, Doug Bibber, clad in his favorite blue and green Hawaiian shirt, greeted Jimmy's fans. He and his older brother Ed, president of Bibber Memorial Chapel, had set up an altar-like table that featured a photo of Buffet, plus a blender, a lime, a bottle of Captain Morgan rum and other icons of Margaritaville. On a stand decorated with twinkling pink flamingo lights, they placed a memorial book for signatures. In the background, "Changes in Latitudes, Changes in Attitudes" and "It's 5 O'Clock Somewhere" played softly over the speakers.

"Jimmy's mourners were multigenerational," Doug Bibber said. "They were all ages, ranging from people in their early 40s to their mid-70s. They just wanted to talk about the different concerts they attended and some of their memorable tailgate parties. They also said they wanted to continue to have good times, suggesting they might want to get together in the future."

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When asked why he arranged this, Bibber said, “Grieving is important. It’s how we continue to live after terrible losses and tragedies. The person who dies – even if that person lived in another part of the world – is always with you. There’s never full closure but mourning helps you move forward. It provides an acceptance and you learn to live with the grief and the loss.”

Jimmy Buffet’s gathering was not the Bibbers’ first foray into community grieving for a person “from away.” Years prior, Ed Bibber, a die-hard NASCAR enthusiast, invited local fans of race car driver Dale Earnhardt Sr. to come to Bibber Memorial Chapel and sign a book of remembrance after the “the Intimidator” died in a crash at the Daytona 500 in February, 2001. Ed, who is deaf, admits he loves car racing “because it’s a sport you don’t need to hear to know what’s going on. I feel the vibrations!”

“I wasn’t sure what to make of such a celebration at the time,” younger brother Doug said. “But I saw that the community came together to mourn a man they loved, and that stuck with me.”

After Barbara Bush died in 2018, President George H. W. Bush followed her a mere eight months later, the Bibber brothers made it known in the community that they had remembrance books available for signature. Doug added, “Both Mrs. Bush and President Bush’s memorial services were held so far away, but they were beloved residents of the Kennebunks. We did not arrange an actual service, but simply invited locals to come sign a mourning book over several days. And yes, they came in droves.”

Doug and Ed Bibber are lifelong residents of Kennebunk. They are proud descendants of the late Richard V. Bibber and grandsons of mortuary founder, Earl V. Bibber. They represent the third generation dedicated to the legacy of Bibber Memorial Chapel.

Following the passing of his father Richard in March, 2023, Doug Bibber described him as “all-encompassing.” The same phrase can aptly be applied to this noted and gracious parrot head here in Maine. Doug Bibber’s Spotify account includes a delightful musical mix of James Taylor, John Denver, Zac Brown and Andrea Bocelli – but the son of a son of a mortician still listens “a lot” to his rock hero. RIP Jimmy Buffet.



Opposite page: Bibber Memorial Chapel. Photo by Bob Dennis. This page, clockwise from top left: Doug Bibber and his older brother Ed set up a shrine to Jimmy Buffet, complete with a blender and bottle of Captain Morgan rum. (Photo by Doug Bibber); Doug Bibber stands outside Bibber Memorial Chapel with the latest addition to the staff – a friendly brown lab service dog known as Ruby Mae. (Photo by Val Marier); Outside the mortuary entrance, Doug Bibber placed a mannequin dressed as a parrot head. (Photo by Doug Bibber)