

Funeral Notice: Passing of Gene Van (1936 - 2018)

Eugene "Gene" J. VanPaemel
February 20, 1936-May 28, 2018

Granger-Eugene "Gene" Jones VanPaemel, 82, passed away peacefully on Memorial Day, May 28, 2018 at The Hospice House in South Bend.

Surviving family include, his wife, Mary Ann (Gerstbauer) VanPaemel; his former wife and mother of his children, Sherry VanPaemel of Elkhart; four daughters, Laura Van Scarborough of Elkhart, Lisa (Vince) DelPrete of Granger, Vanessa (Brian) Jondle of Osceola, Dana VanPaemel (Scott Parrish) of Osceola and Tracy Bacon (Thomas Zuber) of Osceola, whom Gene considered to be "like a daughter"; ten grandchildren, Gabrielle (Nate) Leeper, Nino DelPrete, Angelo DelPrete, Paolo DelPrete, Mateo DelPrete and Jenaro DelPrete, Dominic Oletti, Lucas Oletti, Ben Jondle and Annie Jondle; one great-granddaughter, Ava Rose Jondle.

Gene was a member of St. Thomas the Apostle Catholic Church in Elkhart and previously a member of St. Bavo Catholic Church in Mishawaka.

Gene was born on February 20, 1936, in Mishawaka as the only child to the late George and Josephine (Tordi) VanPaemel. While growing up on the west end of Mishawaka, Gene loved following the (Brooklyn) Dodgers, as well as playing baseball and basketball. To earn some extra money, he would work at his father's gas station. He also had an interest in music.

At a young age, Gene showed a real passion for singing and would often sing along with recordings by the many great opera singers of that time. After finding a vocal coach, Gene's parents purchased a used accordion from a family member which, after taking private lessons, he discovered he could use to accompany himself while singing. It was becoming apparent that Gene had a real musical talent and although he may not have realized it at that time, he had found his calling in life. He entered and won several local and regional talent competitions, both as a vocalist and as an accordionist, earning him a scholarship to study the accordion in Chicago, IL. As a teenager, he started playing his accordion and singing with local bands. Most of the band members were considerably older and more experienced than Gene, but he was a quick learner. He would eventually start his own band using the stage name "Gene Van", which he would continue to use throughout his professional music and business careers.

After graduating from Mishawaka High School in 1954, Gene enlisted in the U.S. Navy. While serving his tour of duty, Gene performed with the U.S. Navy Band Special Services entertaining the many troops here in the United States, as well as throughout the ports of Europe. Upon returning home after serving two years, Gene married his high school sweetheart, Sharon "Sherry" Pirka. Together they raised their four beautiful daughters, Laura, Lisa, Vanessa and Dana. Gene introduced his love and appreciation of music and all it had to offer to each of his girls. As musicians, they made him a proud father. As daughters, they were truly his greatest accomplishment in life.

In 1958, Gene started his own small business in Mishawaka-the Gene Van Accordion Studio, later to be called the Gene Van Conservatory of Music, which he would own and operate for the next 50 years. During the course of those years, Gene introduced hundreds of young (and some not so young) individuals to the world of music using the

piano accordion as the principal instrument. Though many of his students would go on to pursue musical careers, this was not his primary objective. Gene believed that music was an excellent tool to build character, discipline, and self-confidence in young individuals, as well as providing a wholesome outlet for socializing and having fun while doing so. He felt so strongly about this concept that he approached the superintendent of schools for the Fort Wayne-South Bend Catholic Diocese in 1972 with a proposal making basic music education a mandatory part of the curriculum for grades 2-5 in all schools within the diocese. Gene's proposal was accepted and he served as the diocesan coordinator of music from 1972 to 1974.

Since the early 1960's, Gene's students and groups have won countless honors in state, regional and national competitions with their travels taking them to numerous major cities throughout the country, in addition to various guest performances and venues such as Soldier's Field in Chicago, Marquette University in Milwaukee, Hershey Park in Pennsylvania, Six Flags Over St. Louis, Copley Square in Boston, and Carnegie Hall in New York City, to name a few. While the competitions taught the students about setting goals and working hard to achieve those goals, it was the countless local performances and activities that gave them an insight as to what "community" was all about. Whether it was decorating and performing on a float for a local parade, entertaining residents at a local nursing home or retirement facility, performing in a non-stop musical marathon to raise money at a local mall, performing at a local or state university, appearing on a local television program, or being the featured attraction at a local cultural event such as "Carnival for the Arts", it was those experiences and relationships that were forged that would forever leave lasting, unforgettable impressions with these individuals. In recent years, Gene and his accordion orchestra have devoted their time and musical talents to performing benefit concerts raising funds for local charities.

There is a brick in Kate's Garden in Mishawaka's Lincoln Park engraved with Gene's name commemorating 50 years of teaching (as of 2008) and honoring his many accomplishments as a teacher and the contributions that he has made to the many lives that he has touched through his teaching. Gene was an outstanding accordionist, vocalist, composer and arranger, devoted teacher, incredible motivator, forever friend and tireless advocate for the instrument that he loved so much-the accordion.

Gene's family wishes to thank the many healthcare professionals who provided Gene with such excellent care during this past year, especially the staff in the Medical Renal Department at St. Joseph Regional Medical Center, Center for Hospice Care and Hospice House in South Bend, who all provided care during the final weeks and days.

Visitation will be on Thursday, May 31 from 4 to 8 p.m. in Hahn Funeral Home, 505 W. 8th Street, Mishawaka with a Vigil service at 4:30 p.m. A Mass of Christian Burial will be on Friday, June 1 at 11 a.m., with visitation one hour prior, at St. Thomas the Apostle Catholic Church, 1405 North Main Street, Elkhart, with graveside services and burial following at Fairview Cemetery, Mishawaka where Military Rites will be conducted by VFW Post 360/American Legion 151 Burial Team.

In lieu of flowers, Memorial contributions may be made to Hospice Foundation Supporting Center for Hospice Care: South Bend-Elkhart-Plymouth, 501 Comfort Place, Mishawaka, IN 46545.

To leave the family an online condolence, please visit www.hahnfuneralhomes.com.