

**SignalViewpoints**

# Furnish, Gearhart clam digger, raconteur and social media influence dies at age 70

**SEEN FROM SEASIDE**

R.J. MARX



**J**ames “Jim” F. Furnish, 70, who lived the last years of his life as the founder of the Gearhart Facebook pages “A Million Friends of Gearhart” and the “Pacific Way Group,” died Saturday morning.

“This morning we have lost a father, brother, grandfather, and above all a friend,” his son, James, wrote in announcing his death.

Furnish was born Sept. 8, 1950, in Portland and moved to Gearhart at age 9.

His mother, Elna Furnish, was a long-time columnist for the Seaside Signal, writing “Let’s Talk Food” for decades. His father, William Wallace Furnish, a former World War II pilot, was a rancher and insurance broker. Jim Furnish was a 1968 graduate of Seaside High School.



Jim Furnish

He lived in Gearhart for most of his life and worked as a commercial fisherman, an able hand on fishing boats and a professional clam digger.

He worked as drug and alcohol counselor in Seaside for many years.

A self-described “fish-monger,” he was a familiar face at Bell Buoy of Seaside, Country Traveler Online wrote in a 2015 profile. “Behind the counter, the retired fisherman’s energy and enthusiasm for the job belies his age. One minute he is outside tidying up the parking lot, the next minute he’s bringing someone a taste of something new at the little eating bar by the window and then he’s popped back behind the counter helping and joking with a customer he hasn’t seen for a while.”

Furnish was a man of many talents and a wealth of local and other knowledge, Jay Pitman of Clatsop County Sons of Beaches said. “He was a member whom I’ll never forget, a great outdoorsman with respect to our commercial and sportsman culture of the fishing industry. He will be greatly missed on our beach therapy sessions.”

Furnish was an encyclopedia of information about the North Coast, with a knowledge of the characters of days gone by.

As an inveterate beachcomber, he was often featured in The Astorian for his tsunami debris finds, like the large upside down boat dock with writing on the tires in Japanese from Japan’s March 2011 tsunami or the very large U.S. Coast Guard navigation buoy he found on a Gearhart beach. He could discuss at length Rimas Meleshyus, the wayward sailor who only knew how to drift, the long history of Terrible Tilly or “Batman” actor Adam West’s summers in Gearhart.

Furnish dedicated his online social media pages to fond memories of Gearhart days gone by as well as pointed dialogues on city policy and personalities.

The private group Million Friends of Gearhart, created in 2011, now has 1,500 members.

“Can’t help to think about the founder of this site and how he has been the voice of truth in Gearhart,” wrote Kathleen Piner Zimmerman on the Million Friends of Gearhart page. “Love him or hate him he is a voice of reason, common sense and love for ‘keeping Gearhart, Gearhart.’”

Like others in numerous tributes online, Zimmerman described Furnish as “the best Gearhart historian I know and a true icon in the community and not afraid to stand up for what he thinks is the right thing.”

The Pacific Way Group, started by Fur-



Jim Furnish, Emelia and James Furnish.

Courtesy James Furnish



Jim Furnish on the Columbia River.

Courtesy James Furnish



James Furnish, Jim Furnish and Hylah Furnish.

Courtesy James Furnish

nish in 2019, took over conversations considered too political for the Million Friends of Gearhart page. It now has 241 members. The page has become a heated repository for discussions of all topics relating to Gearhart, often no holds barred.

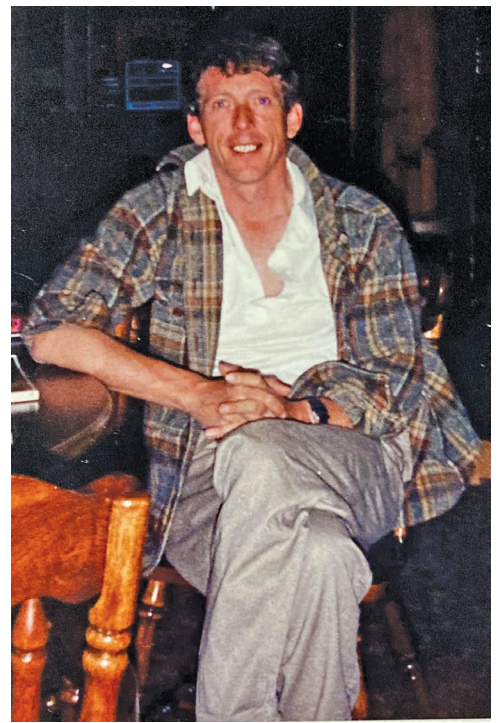
Jack Zimmerman, a co-administrator, said Furnish was very private during his last few years and determined to keep his health challenges from interfering with his Facebook efforts.

He said Furnish’s social media presence



Kathleen Piner Zimmerman

**Kathleen Piner Zimmerman was walking on the beach when she stumbled across Jim Furnish. He dropped off all of his clams at her house after he reached his limit.**



Darien Chrysafts

Jim Furnish in 1992.

was driven by his ability to critique city government, which kept him from running for office.

He was a good friend to all, lifelong Gearhart resident Helen Dawson-Leach said. “He loved Gearhart as all of us old-timers do. He stood up to the powers that be for the town he loved.”

Furnish fought cancer for the past decade, according to a fundraising site organized by his friend Stewart Schultz, and went through surgeries and several bouts of chemotherapy and radiation, including a botched surgery that required a lengthy and painful recovery.

A year and a half ago, Furnish was diagnosed as cancer-free and in good health, Schultz wrote. His symptoms returned in November.

After two weeks in a Portland hospital, he was diagnosed with new metastatic cancers in his liver and pelvic bone.

“He would give whatever he had to help people even though he didn’t have much,” his son said.

“I remember setting up his Yahoo email account in 1998, not realizing I helped create the greatest internet scourge the world would ever know.

“He loved, laughed and lived a life too complex for one person to detail. I don’t know what the afterlife holds, but I know the greatest Clatsop County clam digger is now a part of the whole.”

**LETTER TO THE EDITOR**

**Act now to ‘Save Our Stages’**

The Save Our Stages Act was passed to provide financial assistance to theaters. Unfortunately, it inadvertently excludes community theaters whose actors are volunteers, as opposed to paid, performers.

This would mean that Coaster Theatre, Tillamook Association for the Performing Arts, Peninsula Association for the Performing Arts and Astor Street Opry Company would not be eligible to apply for relief. I have sent the following message to Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, bill sponsors Senators Amy Klobuchar and Chuck Cornyn as well as Rep. Suzanne Bonamici and Senators Merkley and Wyden.

I would welcome anyone to join in advocating for assistance for these cultural venues and offer it for your use and personalization:

Thank you for your efforts in bringing

legislation to help all Americans in these difficult times.

As a member and treasurer of the board of directors of the Coaster Theatre Playhouse located in Cannon Beach, I am writing with a concern about the Save Our Stages portion of the CARES Act 2. While it’s important that cultural venues for music and theater are preserved, the way Save Our Stages is written excludes nonprofit community theaters which exist on limited budgets built through grants and ticket sales.

The artists are volunteers who are contributing to their community and having the opportunity to practice their passion. Thus, the eligibility statement in Save Our Stages which requires that artists be paid rules out the ability of any nonprofit community theater to apply for relief. The Coaster Theatre is one of hundreds of valuable community

cultural venues whose budgets have been decimated at this time; a large portion of our sustenance, ticket sales, is obliterated due to health restrictions.

Grant revenue has become even more important to preserve our future ability to provide artistic and cultural outlet to our performers and audiences, many of whom are invaluable visitors contributing to the important tourist economy of our area.

As this act will be going into effect very soon, we implore you to do everything in your power to make sure that the eligibility requirement that performers are paid (employees) be removed from Save Our Stages in order to protect community theaters — and Coaster Theatre Playhouse.

Thank you.

**Tita Montero Seaside**

**PUBLIC MEETINGS**

Contact local agencies for latest meeting information and attendance guidelines.

**MONDAY, FEB. 8**

**Seaside City Council**, 7 p.m., cityofseaside.us.

**TUESDAY, FEB. 9**

**Sunset Empire Park and Recreation District**, board workshop, 4 p.m., sunsetempire.com.

**TUESDAY, FEB. 16**

**Seaside School District**, 6 p.m., www.seaside.k12.or.us/meetings.

**Seaside Planning Commission**, 6 p.m., worksession, cityofseaside.us.

**MONDAY, FEB. 22**

**Seaside City Council**, 7 p.m., cityofseaside.us.



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