

# In Memoriam: James Nassikas '52

**He held up the ideals of service and hospitality.**

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James Nassikas '52 built his career as a hotelier on a meticulous attention to detail and passion for high-end customer experiences and luxury service. Jim's son Bill says the onetime Independent Hotelier of the World's legacy is his commitment to service and ability to ingrain the same in 300 or 400 staff members. "There was always a consistent high-level product each and every day in my father's work," he says.

Jim attended UNH as a member of the class of 1951, but when a premed course of study didn't hold his attention, he found himself drawn to the school of hotel administration. He graduated in 1952, and that same year married Helen M. Horner. The young couple soon set sail for Switzerland, where Jim earned cuisine and service certificates from the world-renowned Ecole hôtelière de Lausanne. They returned to America four years later, after having their first of two children, and Jim's career flourished, with roles in Manhattan's Plaza hotel, D.C.'s Mayflower and both Royal Orleans and Royal Sonesta hotels in New Orleans. In San Francisco, he developed Stanford Court — a property widely considered the precursor to the modern boutique hotel movement that marked Jim as an inspired innovator. In Utah, he helped to develop the exclusive luxury Deer Valley ski resort.

For his children, family life may have included frequent moves and new schools, but it also meant dinner with celebrities and a life built around the ideal of treating people right — from customers to cleaning staff and every person in between — and passionately pursuing professional success. Lessons about hard work and always striving for work-life balance are among those that Bill, president and COO of Westroc Hospitality, carried forward into his own successful hotel career.

“My dad never pressured me to go into the family business, but I think through interactions with him I learned so much about the profession,” he says.

Daughter Christine '83 remembers growing up in both New Orleans and California, and hosting celebrities and famous chefs like James Beard and Craig Claiborne. Christine also spent many years in the hotel business, and describes her father as a very driven man who never gave her or her brother special treatment.

“He wanted us to go out and work hard and make our own way,” she remembers. “He influenced me by his presence and knowing how successful he was, and that was enough to inspire me.”

Jim's tenure in New Orleans saw him serve as president of the New Orleans Jazz Club and co-founder of the Krewe of Bacchus — a group of business leaders who wanted to improve and extend the impact of the annual Mardi Gras celebration for both residents and tourists. In California, he helped to launch the idea of “California cuisine,” bringing together culinary elite and hospitality luxury and laying the foundation for the “foodie” movement in the U.S. He also is credited with raising the profile of the Napa Valley wine industry by featuring local wines in his high-end properties.

Ray Goodman Jr., professor emeritus of hospitality at UNH's Paul College and former hospitality department chair, counted Jim among his friends. “He was considered the No. 1 hotelier,” Goodman says. “There were the Hiltons and the Marriotts, certainly, but he was a single person who was holding up the ideals of service and hospitality.”

In addition to the hospitality industry, Jim's legacy lives on also at UNH, where the James and Helen Nassikas Endowed Scholarship is awarded each year to students from New Hampshire who are hardworking and motivated, but who also have a positive influence on those around them.

At the time he established the fund, Jim shared his belief that his work ethic was something he inherited from his mother, Christine Cotsibos, who came to America as a Greek immigrant in 1909, and who, widowed at a young age, worked tirelessly to support Jim and his brother Lewis.

Jim died on March 31, 2019, at the age of 91.

- WRITTEN BY:

[Michelle Morrissey '97](#) | UNH Donor Communications  
| [michelle.morrissey@unh.edu](mailto:michelle.morrissey@unh.edu) | 603-862-0527

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