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## James Davis dies in race

By Brad Rich and Lockwood Phillips

NEWS-TIMES

**GRIMESLAND** – Carteret County lost a Good Samaritan in sneakers Saturday morning when J.M. “James” Davis died during the Lake Kristi swimming segment of a half-triathlon on a hot, muggy day in this small town southeast of Greenville.

Mr. Davis, owner of J.M. Davis Industries, which operated Jim Dandy and Handy House convenience stores and gas stations in eastern North Carolina, was a tough, successful businessman, widely known for his frequent and generous financial contributions to numerous worthy causes.

But to friends and fellow amateur athletes, especially those who for years had trained with him in and around The Sports Center in Morehead City, he was more a wise-cracking, down-to-earth outdoorsman, an athletic inspiration, a big guy with a bigger heart who, despite gimpy knees, pushed himself beyond his physical limitations and pulled his pals in his wake.

“He was just extremely strong-willed,” a saddened Sports Center owner Cass Flowers said Saturday afternoon. “He willed himself past his pain; he’d go out and run, he’d get on the treadmill, he’d swim laps.

“To put it in just a few words, he was a hard-core athlete with a lot of grit. He had a passionate commitment to fitness and he inspired others because of that.”

Karen Amspacher, director of the Core Sound Waterfowl Museum, was a close friend and noted that the museum benefited greatly from Mr. Davis’s generosity and service as past president.

“James Davis was the best Core Sound has to give,” she said, referring to the down east water body Mr. Davis loved. “He was strong in spirit, honest and determined. No one has been a better friend to the museum or more instrumental in its success than James.”

According to other members of the Carteret county team competing in the Lake Kristi Triathlon - a half-mile swim, 15-mile bike race and 5K run -. Mr. Davis' body was discovered in waist deep water about a third of the distance from the start of the swim.

Jessica Webb, a photographer covering the race for the Greenville Daily Reflector, said those at the event knew something had gone wrong when bike 158 didn’t have a rider after Mr. Davis’s group finished the swim.

“They called his name over the speaker several times,” but he didn’t show up,” she said.

The swim portion is always the first leg of triathlons. Competitors were racing to raise money for Pitt county Special Olympics

The exact cause of Mr. Davis’s death was still undetermined Saturday afternoon as friends gathered at the Davis house in Wildwood.

They expressed deep shock over his death and said he had been in excellent shape and had given them no indication of any unusual physical problem.

Mr. Davis' high point in competition was the successful finish of the Great Floridian Iron-man Triathlon, a 26.2-mile marathon, 112-mile bike run and a 2.4-mile swim, in 1993.

Over the years Mr. Davis slowed down his running according to Bruce Caldwell, area Vice president with First Citizen and good friend.

“He was a flat good guy,” Mr. Caldwell said. “He always described himself as a tortoise when it came to business,” but his business thrived in a very competitive environment.

He took over J. M. Davis Industries, a local oil jobber, from his father James Morton Davis.

In more than 30 years of management of the oil company, the younger Mr. Davis expanded the company to include 17 stores.

He served on the board of the North Carolina Association of Convenience Stores becoming its president in 1988. In 2003 he and his company were recognized for outstanding service when he was awarded Retailer of the Year. He was also past president of the local board of directors for First Citizen Bank.

His community service included establishing the Nelson Bay Triathlon to raise money for the Sea Level Rescue Squad and numerous youth projects. His love for hunting led him to be an active member and board member of the local Ducks Unlimited. He took an active role in the DU Greenwings program for young hunters.

He had recently started a charitable foundation, HELPS, raising more than \$20,000 per year for community youth-focused projects in the county according to Glenn Lowe, the company's convenience store manager. By the end of this year, the foundation is expected to have raised \$250,000.

Frequent running partner and close friend Tabbie Merrill, who also competed in the race Saturday, said Mr. Davis was known throughout the state as “Hammerman” because he was always ready to put the hammer down competitively and go all out.

She said he was passionate about everything he set out to do.

“He was the pied piper of health,” Ms. Merrill said. “He wanted us all to live healthy lifestyles.”

“He made all of us want to be healthier,” she explained. “He'd call us up and make us work out even when we weren't motivated.”

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