

Neil Punches  
February 16, 1927 - May 17, 2023  
by Larry J. Pellet

There's ordinary and then there is extraordinary, and right after that there is Neil Leaver Punches. A man born to ambitious parents - Lloyd Leaver "Curley" Punches and mother Dorothy in 1927 - only to excel in his own right and carve out a legacy in his community, Neil epitomized what could aptly be described as the American dream.

Neil in his military days in 1949 to Rita (Gerstner), the couple soon gave birth to daughter Linda, followed by sons Brian and Greg. Hardworking, adventurous and a veteran of two branches of the armed services, the Cloverville stalwart was instrumental in forging out a grocery store chain that began in 1946 with a 5000 sq feet location on the corner of Hts. Ravenna Rd and Dangle he built with his parents. Eventual competition would come from A&P Market across the street, and Herron's Market on neighboring Black Creek Rd.

Ever versatile, the Punches were quite adept at slaughtering their own cows, pigs, goats and chickens to keep the business alive during lean times.

Despite the early adversity, Punches took over full ownership of the business in 1960 and made eight expansions, not the least of which was adding Ellis Pharmacy. In the early 1970's Neil became chairman of the Vikings Board of Directors before being named in a national publication as one of 3 area grocers as "Outstanding Independents," later purchasing Plumbs Market just down the road. He moved his business into the 25,000 sq ft store that he opened in 1984 with his boys.

Growth, largely due to a hard work ethic and existing family property, led Neil and his family to open and operate Orchard Market food stores that spanned from Shelby to North Muskegon to Fruitport (Fruitport Foods in 1986) to Spring Lake in subsequent years, before selling the chain in 1999.

If it is true what Roman Emperor Marcus Aerialious once said, "A man's worth is no greater than his ambitions," then Neil hit the jackpot at the end of the rainbow.

Being the naturalist that he was, Punches even had his own live Buffalo farm. "We used to go over there and mess with them," grinned neighbor John



Animal showcase



Fruitport Area News • November 2023 • Page 27

Fialek. "Old man Curley would get so mad!" In a rare treat last June, the Punches family opened Neil's animal trophy room for visitors as a last memorial to the man who showcased not only the fruits of his hard labor, but his love for traveling to 25 countries and hunting on the African safari. Many of the full capacity crowd shared fond memories of the animals on display that lightened their visits to the stores as children, and still amazed them as adults.

"There is the cat they used to display by the cash register," reminisced Darren Luce. Yeah, next to the monkey, the moose, the bison, the Rhino, the zebra, the lion, the hippo, the alligator, and most of all the center piece - the head of a massive elephant of whose carcass fed many of the local African villagers at the time of its capture.

Perhaps most importantly, Neil will be remembered as a good neighbor who liked to play cards on Tuesdays and was instrumental in his town. "He was always nice to me as a paperboy," recalled Cloverville native Ron Mumby.

"Neil was good, one of those special community citizens," recalled Fruitport historian Ron Cooper. "Boy scouts, Lions Club...any non-profit group could go into his store and get help."

Rightfully so, the man who oversaw the rise of employees from 5 to 180 at his beloved markets over the course of a lifetime will surely be remembered fondly in Cloverville lore.



Original store

Punches 1956

# GRAND OPENING

**FREE** 21-Inch COLOR TELEVISION SET  
Come In and Register...  
No Purchase Necessary  
**PLUS - 50** Food Baskets and Other Prizes

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Starts Wed., May 22 thru Sat.

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Birds Eye FROZEN PEAS **29¢** 2 Pkgs.  
KEYKO OLEO Special **59¢** 3 Lbs.  
Tree Sweet Frozen ORANGE JUICE **10¢** 6-OZ. Cans

**CHICKEN-OF-THE-SEA TUNA** 3 cans **89¢**  
MONDAY thru THURSDAY 8 to 8 p.m.  
FRIDAY and SATURDAY 8 to 9 p.m.  
SUNDAY 9 to 1 p.m.

**PUNCHES SUPER MARKET**  
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Prices from a grand opening expansion



Rita and Dorothy with Mrs. America 1963

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## COMMUNITY ON THE LAKESHORE

**DID YOU KNOW?**

- For every **\$100** you spend at locally owned businesses, **\$68** will stay in the community.
- For every **\$100** spent at a national chain, only **\$43** stays in the community.

## 2-1-1

Get Connected. Get Answers.  
Community Access Line of the Lakeshore

- A single dad wants to join a parent support group
- A nineteen year old college student seeks HIV testing
- A runaway teen needs a safe place to stay
- A working woman seeks adult day care for her elderly father and a caregiver support group for herself
- A senior citizen wants to volunteer
- A young family in financial crisis searches for budget counseling



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We depend on volunteers to house and raise the special dogs that will enhance the quality of life for a person with a disability. Our PAWS Dog Volunteers ensure every PAWS Dog is born and raised in a caring home.

A PAWS Puppy Raiser cares for a puppy in their home, teaches basic obedience, socializes and exposes him to public environments. PAWS puppies live with their Raisers from about 8 weeks until 12-14 months old when they return to us for formal training.

A PAWS Breeding Host Home trains and cares for a PAWS Mama or Papa Dog and makes them available to PAWS during breeding times. Families who host Mama Dogs may also assist with whelping and raising litters until the puppies are 8 weeks old.

We need loving families like yours to help raise our PAWS Dogs. Will you help?

**FOR MORE INFORMATION**  
[pawswithacause.org/volunteer](http://pawswithacause.org/volunteer)

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