

Friends recall Doner's magic

By Darrell Ciem
staff writer

When word of advertising great W.B. "Brod" Doner's death reached James August, his thoughts flashed back to 1953.

August was 17, just a kid, when he asked for a job at Doner's advertising agency, W.B. Doner & Co. He approached Doner three times before he was hired two years later.

A Doner agency slogan for Faygo soda pop comes to mind: "Remember when you were a kid. Well, part of you still is."

That rang ever so true Friday as August remembered his friend and mentor.

"I always believed that Brod had magical powers," said August, now president of Troy-based Stone August Baker Communications. "All of a sudden you find that your fool isn't immortal. That's the jarring thought I've been living with this morning."

Friends, family and business people, including competitors, were deeply saddened by the death of Doner, 75, of Birmingham, who died Thursday of cerebral vascular complications. He had been ill for two days.

"He was, one-on-one, the smartest advertising man I ever met," August said. "No one was in second place. He had a brilliant sense of humor, and he understood that great humor does not come at the expense of someone else."

Doner's Southfield-based agency, the nation's 26th largest with 530 employees, started with two employees in 1937. The agency's accounts range from Highland Appliance to the Detroit Zoo to Speedway gasoline to Hygrade Ball Park Franks.

"Speedway's going steady with ethyl," Doner's company told us. "They plump when you cook 'em," we learned about Hygrade franks.

"He stressed truthful advertising,

likeable advertising, that aimed at the head, heart and funnybone," said Craig Fiechura, the Doner company's creative group supervisor, vice president. "He knew that people were not waiting to see your ad, so you had to entertain them or touch them in some way. I think he succeeded in doing that."

"Everybody here in the office is just devastated by his death," Fiechura said. "He was so vibrant. I remember at Christmas he popped his head in all the offices and wished everybody a merry Christmas. He was the kind of person who talked to everyone, from the mail room to the board of directors."

Doner's daughter, Judith Doner Berne of West Bloomfield, recalled a father who worked long hours but managed to spend "quality time" with his family.

"I think his greatest accomplishment is the building of the advertising agency, which he started as a kid out of college," said Berne, the Oakland County assistant managing editor of the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers. "I would say you could never find anybody who could say anything bad about him. He was loved by everybody who worked with him, by those who had business with him, and by his family. I think that's a good combination, and I don't think many people have that."

Berne also recalled small things her father did, like stop on the way home from work to buy White Castle hamburgers for his children.

Doner's ambition remained strong all his life. In the past six months, his firm lured a worldwide account for British Petroleum away from Saatchi & Saatchi of New York, the largest advertising agency in the world. Yet he never got the automaker account that he wanted.

Doner would have made the automaker commercials "more human," Berne said. "It would have given a



W.B. Doner will be remembered as a leader in the creative field of advertising.

wrote new (flavor to (automobile) advertising."

In his spare time, Doner often walked the streets of Birmingham. "He loved being in such a small, dynamic city," Berne said. "It was very important to him."

Described as a mentor to family and those in the advertising world, Doner inspired those around him, said August, who received moral support from Doner even after he left the Doner firm in 1968.

"He was the kind of person who would put you out in a boat, push you out in the lake, but make sure you had a string and two tin cans," August said. "You could call him for instructions, but he made you do the rowing. We're all going to miss him. He made the advertising business better."

Doner is survived by his wife, Rola; two other daughters, Mary Borna of New York and Beth Wexner of Chicago; three sons, Dean Friedman of Franklin, Randy Friedman of Farmington Hills and Fred Doner of New York; a brother, Milton Doner of Southfield; a sister, Alice Burnes of Detroit; and 13 grandchildren.

He was a life member of the Ad-craft Club of Detroit, director of the National Multiple Sclerosis Society and the International MS Society.

Services were Sunday in the Ira Kaufman Chapel in Southfield, with burial in Beth El Memorial Park.

Review angers group

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"This has nothing to do with Lubavitch," Draur said. "It's very difficult to address what they're saying," she added.

TOWNSHIP OFFICIALS, Draur said, hope to revise current law to clarify the status of property for which special uses, that for one reason or another aren't carried out, have been approved.

For example, if construction of a hospital on property zoned for residential development is approved as a special use, but the hospital is never built, does the property revert to residential zoning or remain open to development as a hospital?

Township officials are unclear on this point and want the planning commission to review existing law to see if changes are needed to give the township more control in such situations, Draur said.

In November township trustees failed to approve a proposal to amend the zoning ordinance to allow campus facilities associated with schools or colleges as a special use in areas zoned for multi-family residential development. Under current law such special uses are allowed only in areas zoned for single-family residential use.

Lubavitch officials, who say they eventually plan to build an educational facility on 40 acres of single-family-zoned land the foundation owns near Maple and Drake roads, saw the proposal's defeat as a show of support for their planned facility.

"We looked at it as approval," Falbaum said.

In fact, before construction begins the foundation must obtain township approval of the special use and then submit and gain approval of a site plan.

If in the meantime the ordinance is changed in a way that prohibits special approval of campuses in land zoned for single-family development, the foundation can request that the land be rezoned.

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Seniors ring in the '90s

Approximately 150 young-at-heart senior citizens from the American House Retirement Residences will be ringing in the 1990s at 2:30 p.m. Tuesday, Jan. 9, in Farmington Hills American House, 24400 Middlebelt Road.

The event is open to the public at no charge.

"This is a celebration of life," said Bob Gillette, president of American House. "We want everyone to know there are things to look forward to and ways to enjoy life, no matter what your age, or the age in which you live."

Special guests will include Gladys Russell, a 79-year-old whistler extraordinaire who has appeared on the David Letterman show, and 76-year-old Peter Bolos, an expert at jumping rope and ballroom dancing. Certificates of recognition will be given to all American House residents and guests who are over 90 years old, or will turn 90 in the coming year.

THE EVENT also will feature a sing-along with a group from the American House band, the Music Makers, under the leadership of Betty Houghton, full-time director for American House.

The entire band is comprised of almost 100 residents, ages 65-95, who come from nearly all of the American House locations in Southeast Michigan.

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