



John "Ross" Harris

DEC 25, 1953 - MAR 1, 2006



Scan to Visit

Table of Contents

Obituary	Page 3
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In Rehoboth Beach and the other communities where Ross Harris conducted business, most recently as founder, president and CEO of Environmental Consultants International Corporation (ECI), he was recognized for his integrity, commitment and visionary leadership. While Harris, 52, was the recipient of numerous professional honors, his business achievements were equaled only by his philanthropy within the community and beyond, and his identity as an extraordinary friend.

Those who knew him best use the words "generous," "vibrant," "visionary" and "constant" to describe the man who brought so much to their lives. They recall shared sailing adventures, inspired conversation, and fine meals around welcoming tables. All have at least one tale of help from Harris when they needed it most. "He had a gift for helping people to believe in themselves," said his friend Karen Jones.

Surrounded by loving family and friends, Harris died March 1 due to complications from cancer. He was born John Ross Harris, Jr. on December 25, 1953, in Gastonia, N.C. Just six weeks later, he moved with his family to Wilmington, Del., and from there to Geneva, Switzerland in 1959. By 1962, the family was back in Wilmington. Harris graduated from the University of Delaware in just three years with a degree in agricultural engineering, and earned his graduate degree in biological and agricultural engineering from North Carolina State University in 1978.

Harris moved to Sussex County in the early 1980s, dabbling briefly in the pizza business by opening the Back Bay pizza shop on Long Neck Road and, later, a second one in Georgetown. Almost simultaneously, he served as an environmental quality specialist for the University of Delaware's Cooperative Extension Service, working as a liaison between the university and local and state governments on programs to reduce soil and water pollution. In 1987, Harris served as program manager for the Delaware Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control (DNREC), overseeing permit reviews and policies to provide better service to Delaware citizens. In 1989, he was named vice president of engineering for Peter E. Loewenstein and



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Associates, Inc., a private engineering and surveying firm where he managed project development and a growing staff.

ECI became his crowning achievement in 1991, allowing Harris to design the kind of company where social responsibility and the prosperity of individual staff members were as primary to success as business strategy. "Ross, through ECI, offered employee benefits that rival those of the biggest corporations," said friend Bill McManus, who is also executive assistant of External Affairs for ECI. An environmental engineering, surveying, planning and management consulting firm, ECI gave Harris the opportunity to meld personal values with professional experience to make a significant impact. He was president of the Association of Consulting Engineers, former president of the Delaware Association of Professional Engineers, and a member of a dozen other community and professional groups that valued his leadership. Harris designed a stormwater treatment system for a shopping center that was the first of its kind in Delaware. His successes enabled him to open branch locations of ECI in Exton, Pa., and Millville, Del.

In 2004, the Delaware state Congress named Harris Employer of the Year. Harris would say later that this recognition was most gratifying not because of the prestige it carried, but because an ECI employee had been moved to nominate him.

Harris' name was familiar to anyone who attended events such as the Rehoboth Autumn Jazz, Rehoboth Independent Film Festival, Celebrity Chef's Beach Brunch and a host of others he sponsored through ECI. He generously supported the work of Sussex County volunteer firefighters, senior services, Habitat for Humanity and dozens of other organizations whose missions he admired. "He had a heart of gold," said friend Nadine Lockley, who is also ECI's executive assistant. "And he never expected anything in return."

Ross was a member of the Rehoboth Sailing Association, Harris harbored a deep love for the ocean that he routinely honored at the helm of a sailboat. When not on the water, Harris savored time at his cabin in the mountains of Pennsylvania, where he hunted and spent time with cherished friends. His passion for fine dining and wines was deeply appreciated among the Rehoboth-area restaurateurs who knew him well, as were his love for art and music – from classical to Jimmy Buffet. His travels to Germany and the British Virgin Islands served his many gifts, including fluency in German and a flair for island living. Deemed "a true Renaissance man" by friend David Nelson, Harris balanced his wealth of knowledge with a commitment to learning still more along what he often called his life's "journey."



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"He was a private person, but so giving with those who were his good friends," said friend Melissa Clink. "My guests [at At Melissa's Bed 'n' Breakfast] would always look forward to his visits; he always showed up with an amazing bottle of wine and told great stories."

"Ross would always challenge you, and champion you as well," said his brother, Richard. "He inspired a brother's respect."

Those who continue to share his love and passion for life are his parents, John Ross Harris, Sr. and Winifred Jordan Harris of Wilmington; his brother and family: Richard Spencer Harris and his wife Luana Marie, his niece Trinity Katarina and nephew Cutter Bach Harris, all of Reading, PA; his paternal uncle, Worthington J. Harris, of Charlotte, N.C.; and his maternal aunt and uncle, Ralph H. and Nadine Jordan, of Gastonia, N.C.

A memorial reception will be held March 6, 1 p.m., at Kings Creek Country Club, 1 Kings Creek Circle, Rehoboth Beach. Donations may be made to the American Cancer Society, P.O. Box 163, Salisbury, MD 21803-0163, or Ducks Unlimited, Sussex County Chapter, 30 Horseshoe Drive, Milford, DE 19963.

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