



# Raymond H Neri

JUL 26, 1937 - JAN 3, 2017



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## Raymond H Neri

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**T**here is no city hall, but there is a Denny's where Pinellas County officials would gather at a booth to strategize how to improve the community.

It was Ray Neri who brought them there. His driving tours shed light on the challenges facing his community, and his tireless efforts made it better.

"He basically gave me the background of Lealman," County Commissioner Ken Welch said. "I think that's his legacy he conveyed to the rest of the county — that Lealman is a community with history and with some unique needs that need to be addressed."

Mr. Neri died Tuesday at Northside Hospital after he fell off a chair and hit his head, causing internal bleeding, said his wife, Laura Neri. He was 79.

Mr. Neri was born in the Bronx and moved at a young age to Brooklyn, where he lived on Coney Island. At 13, he and his family moved to Lealman into a house he and his father built together, his wife said. He attended St. Petersburg High School and served in the Navy for a decade after graduating, then came back to the Tampa Bay area to attend the University of Tampa. Mr. Neri eventually started working at Zales jewelers, working his way up to regional manager.

Living back in Lealman, an unincorporated area between St. Petersburg and Pinellas Park, Mr. Neri developed a passion for the area and saw a potential in it that few did, County Commissioner Charlie Justice said. He noticed it was one of the highest places above sea level in the county. He saw Joe's Creek Industrial Park as a spot for business development. He recognized the community's accessibility in its proximity to Interstate 275.

"He saw it the way I think others see it now: that Lealman is a place of potential and opportunity," Justice said.



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Mr. Neri also saw what was preventing his community from fulfilling that potential and was determined to make everyone else see it, too. Welch, who represents a district that includes Lealman, said Mr. Neri called him up after Welch was elected to the commission in 2000 and told him they should — or, as Welch remembered it, must — meet at the Denny's at 4999 34th St. N, known to many as Lealman City Hall.

He later drove Welch around the community, pointing out dilapidated housing, worn-down roads and drainage woes in the low-income area.

Mr. Neri's frank persistence bloomed into tangible change. To name just a sliver: Where there was once an overgrown patch of scrub is now a peaceful preserve called Joe's Creek Greenway Park. The county formed a uniform trash collection system to help get garbage off the streets that Welch remembered seeing during his tour. Lealman became the first unincorporated community redevelopment area, a special district that keeps tax dollars within the district.

His deep involvement in the community was driven by a hope for the children that lived there, said Laura Neri, 70.

"He thought that if we could get to them early enough, then we could change the course of some of their lives," she said, "and then in the long run that would change the community."

Mr. Neri spent years bugging county officials to bring a safe place for teens to hang out that resulted in a Pinellas Sheriff's Police Athletic League center opening on 46th Avenue N. In 2011, he was appointed to the Juvenile Welfare Board, where he quickly became a key member, said Marcie Biddleman, executive director.

Even in that role, his focus was on Lealman. Several volunteers from the board participated in Adopt-a-Block, a program run by the Florida Dream Center aimed at neighborhood cleanup.

"You became a believer with Ray," Biddleman said.

So many became believers with him, in his persistence and vision and unforgiving way of telling the truth. Welch remembered Neri's fight against annexation by surrounding cities, pushing the County Commission to step in with an honest plea: These people elected you. They need your voice.



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"He knew how to speak truth to power," Welch said. "I think when they made that term up, they had a picture of Ray Neri."

Biography: Ray Neri

•Birth: July 26, 1937




•Death: Jan. 3, 2016

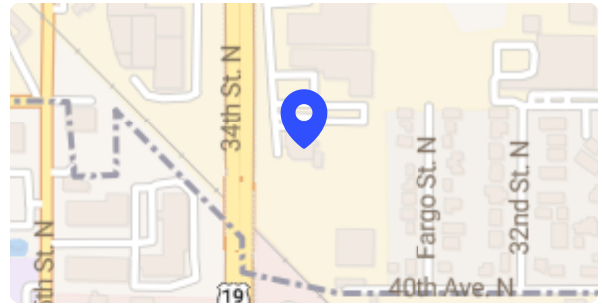
•Survivors: wife, Laura Neri; sister Carol Stewart; children Joe Neri, Perri Zimmerman and Martin Neri; stepchildren Joseph Schiavone and Shannon Schiavone; grandchildren Joelle Neri-Dettera, Nick Neri, Julie Neri, Tori Schaer

A memorial will be held at 10 a.m. Wednesday at the VFW hall, 4145 34th St. N.



## Memorial Service

-  **Wednesday**, January 11, 2017
-  10:00 AM ET
-  **VFW Post 6827**  
4145 34th Street North, St. Petersburg FL





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