

# Chuck Volwiler, helped restore 1930s theater

RE-LIT DEL MAR MARQUEE IN SANTA CRUZ

By David L. Beck  
*Mercury News*

The gaudy neon marquee of the Del Mar may be downtown Santa Cruz's brightest memorial to Chuck Volwiler, one of the driving spirits behind the restoration of the 1930s movie palace. Mr. Volwiler, 46, a co-owner of the Nickelodeon art-house complex and an operator of the Del Mar, died Saturday after battling kidney cancer for six months.

In 2001 Mr. Volwiler and his partner, Jim Schwenterley, joined two local builders, Jesse Nickell of Barry Swenson Builder and George Ow Jr., and the Santa Cruz Redevelopment Agency in rescuing the Del Mar from United Artists, which had allowed it to fall into disrepair and finally closed it.

"We all kind of got into his vision," Nickell said. "His taste was really good; his architectural sense was really strong; he had a good sense of detail." And, said Nickell, "he was a pretty strong businessman."

That was his role at the Nickelodeon, said Schwenterley. Schwenterley bought the four-screen Santa Cruz movie house in 1992, about the time he met Mr. Volwiler at a "Gay Evening in May" event. They became friends, then partners, then business partners.

"Chuck was not a film buff per se," Schwenterley said. "Like a lot of people, he liked movies, but didn't have any particular interest in any one aspect of them. He had a good, solid business background, which made it perfect for the partnership, because I don't."

But he also had "a really artistic side. As much as my interest was in movies, his was in architecture," Schwenterley said. "Oh, man, he loved buildings."

That made the Del Mar a perfect project for Mr. Volwiler.

In a 2001 interview, Mr. Vol-

wiler called the movie palace "amazing," and described the "beautiful friezes on the walls that are still intact ... the plaster work ... the beautiful light fixtures."

And, of course, "it has an incredible marquee on it, which we are looking forward to getting re-lit."

Even though illuminating the 1930s neon was not part of the original budget, Mr. Volwiler persevered. He found a man with a passion for old signs, Oakland's Greg King, and got him to spend six months on the roof of the building, sometimes sleeping on Mr. Volwiler's and Schwenterley's sofa, tinkering with the old-fashioned mechanism (the sign's changing colors are operated by a chain) and restoring it to health.

Mr. Volwiler "completely managed the marquee," said architect Arnie Lerner, who along with Mr. Volwiler, Schwenterley and the other partners won a governor's preservation award for the Del Mar. Mr. Volwiler also designed and supervised the new concession stand.

When it opened in February, "he was thrilled," recalled Schwenterley. "He considered it kind of a real privilege and a great opportunity to go in there and work on such a building and make it come out as well as it did, with really limited funds."

Mr. Volwiler was born in Illinois and raised in Pennsylvania, New Orleans and Stockton, said his mother, Lynn Volwiler, who remembered him as an "inventive, creative kind of person" as a child and the business student of the year at Santa Clara University.

He was also a passionate collector who loved junk and antique stores. "He would get into a phase where he decided he really liked old globes," Schwenterley said. "And he'd fill a whole room with them practically. Then he would

## CHUCK VOLWILER

**Born:** Jan. 4, 1956, in Waukegan, Ill.

**Died:** Dec. 28, 2002, in Santa Cruz

**Survived by:** Partner, Jim Schwenterley; parents, Lynn and Wally Volwiler of Morrison, Colo.; brothers, Stewart Volwiler of Spokane and Richard Volwiler of Mount Vernon, Wash.; nephews and a niece.

**Memorial:** 2 p.m. Saturday at Oakwood Memorial Chapel, 3301 Paul Sweet Road, Santa Cruz.



say, 'I'm over this,' and he would sell them off or give them away or whatever. One time he got into antique luggage."

Before "semi-retiring" to Santa Cruz and investing in the Nickelodeon, Mr. Volwiler lived in San Jose, where he founded Hello Direct for a group of investors. Hello Direct, which develops and markets desktop communications devices, merged with GN Netcom in 2000.

Mr. Volwiler worked out, and hadn't smoked in 15 years or had a drink in more than 20. "Chuck's lifestyle was so healthy that it was a shock," Lynn Volwiler said.

He was diagnosed with kidney cancer in June. "In typical Chuck fashion, he really wanted to kind of make things easy for everyone else," said Judy Bouley, a longtime friend and former housemate of Mr. Volwiler's and Schwenterley's. "So he just vigilantly dealt with his treatments, taking good care of himself."

Mr. Volwiler's parents and family joined him and his partner and Bouley for Christmas dinner, and were with him when he died at home.

"In the 10 years we were together, Chuck taught me a lot," Schwenterley said, including "how to open yourself up to a wide variety of people. ... I was always amazed at how democratic he was about it. Chuck did not have that filtering device. And I thought to myself, that is such a right way to be."

Contact David L. Beck at [dbeck@sjmercury.com](mailto:dbeck@sjmercury.com) or at (831) 423-0960.