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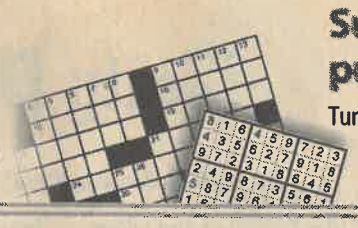

Sunday puzzle page
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Making this a better place

"Melpomene" by Romolo Del Deo welcomes people to Port Warwick.
PHOTO BY DAVE BOWMAN/ DAILY PRESS

Bobby Freeman is the visionary behind Port Warwick and city's public art

BY PRUE SALASKY
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Bobby Freeman has taken his hometown of Newport News and turned it into a canvas for his creativity.

His major works include the conception and construction of Port Warwick, a 153-acre, mixed-use development in midtown; the launching of a public sculpture initiative; and helping to guide the growth of Christopher Newport University.

A devotee of New York City since childhood visits left a lasting imprint, and widely traveled in Europe, Freeman, 53, has never seriously considered living anywhere other than Newport News. It's home — where his family has lived for generations, where he grew up, where his business and real estate holdings are.

"As a developer the unusual part is that you really get an opportunity to make a permanent mark on the community."

Rather than moving to a metropolitan area to satisfy his wide-ranging interests, Freeman has simply set about creating the city he wants to live in with the activities he enjoys. He has done so by building a community at Port Warwick to draw like-minded residents — more than half of whom, he says, are drawn from outside of the region. Instead of the usual amenities and recreational facilities, such as a swimming pool and tennis courts, he has cultivated a culture (and a property-owners association to support it) that values the arts by installing public sculptures and hosting weekly concerts.

"Much of what I build is what I want for myself," he concedes. In the absence of a historic urban core, his notion was to create a community like Norfolk's Ghent or Richmond's Fan district. The installation of monumental sculptures on several streets gave momentum to his push to establish public art throughout the city.

Port Warwick, the unique town-within-a-town, brings together many of the strands of Freeman's experience as an entrepreneur and developer and his current enthusiasms — for sculpture, music, food and wines — as well as involving his family. All of his immediate family, his parents, sister and wife, either live or work (or both) in Port Warwick. Freeman "commutes to work" most nights by walking from his home to his restaurant, Light, which houses his extensive wine collection; there he's currently immersing himself in learning the ins and outs of the restaurant business and its culinary underpinnings.

Salasky is an associate editor of the editorial page.

Bobby Freeman stands in front of a sculpture titled "Natural," by Masaru Bando, located in the Port Warwick development in Newport News. PHOTO BY ADRIN SNIDER/DAILY PRESS

"I look at every property and see what's unique, what belongs there."

Freeman holds a firm belief that every property demands its own design. Port Warwick, for example, with its awkward T-shape and railroad track forming the boundary, is uniquely suited to its location.

"I had to change the conversation ... and draw attention away from the railroad. I used the oldest trick in the book — the village square."

The idea for nearby City Center with its circle and fountain was already in place, so he didn't want to duplicate it and do offices. He wanted his project to act as a complement to it.

"I had a singular vision and I worked on it 100 hours a week," he says of the difficult site.

As it's place-specific. Freeman won't try to reprise Port Warwick anywhere else.

While others build and sell, Freeman quips that he likes to build and hold. He works during the day from an office that was his first commercial venture, one of two buildings on a long, narrow, "funny piece of property" at the corner of Diligence Boulevard and Thimble Shoals Boulevard. It was there that he experimented and found he could change the area's dynamic, in this instance by installing a clock tower on the

Please see A BETTER PLACE/H4

Our Citizen of the Year

BY PRUE SALASKY
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Robert L. "Bobby" Freeman Jr. is the 2006 Daily Press Citizen of the Year.

For generations the Freeman family has lived, worked and contributed to the community on the Peninsula. Both of Freeman's grandfathers worked at the shipyard, now Northrop Grumman Newport News, and his parents, Dorothy and Robert Freeman Sr., have promoted — and continue to support — innumerable local causes.

Much of Freeman's professional and business life and many of his civic interests have intertwined and overlapped with his father's, a retired certified public accountant. He credits his father with piling on responsibility early, trusting him to make decisions on his own. So though he followed his father into accounting — "it was preordained" — he then took a two-decade detour to pursue a successful law career, culminating in a five-year stint as managing partner of the Peninsula's largest law firm. In 1998, he stepped away from his law practice to help his father with his business interests.

Over the past few years, Freeman has used his solid base — his family, his education, experience and community commitment — as a springboard to launch several ventures that are all his own. In doing so, he has literally changed the city's landscape.

His transformation of the once-problematic former Eveready Battery site into Port Warwick, an original mixed-use development in the heart of midtown Newport News, has affected not only how its 1,500 residents live and what they expect from their community, its reach also has rippled into other parts of the city and beyond. Some label it "new urbanism" and "smart growth." Freeman sees it as helping to make Newport News a more dynamic place, one where people will choose to live.

In conjunction with Port War-

Please see CITIZEN OF THE YEAR/H4

Homegrown developer is leading the city's transformation

"Port Warwick has been huge success. When he came to the city about it, some of our people thought it could be a school bus parking lot. ... "He understands about place — place matters. ... You can't ignore the contribution of art and the arts as a huge part of people's sense of well-being and economic development to attract people who have choices. ... I think he's a huge asset for this community."

JOE FRANK
mayor of Newport News

"He has spent countless hours dreaming and strategizing our future, strengthening our academic programs, raising friends and capital to make our aspirations come true. No one is more responsible for our success, no one has contributed more. ... He possesses a remarkable combination of mind and heart and spirit."

PAUL TRIBLE
president of Christopher Newport University

"He came out of law school as a good lawyer and was with us many years. He's a very sharp guy. The partners thought enough of him to make him managing partner; that says what the firm thinks of him. ... A very sharp, competent business guy — that he got from his daddy. He's very successful because he knows when and how to do things; the 'when' is as important as anything."

HERBERT KELLY SR.
senior partner and president of the law firm Jones, Blechman, Woltz and Kelly

"I met Bobby Freeman in Pietrasanta, Italy, three years ago. ... He is one of the few people who has ever been in my studio who was actually able to imagine small models on a large scale, which is something that even some sculptors are unable to do. His vision was matched by his exceptional ability to communicate this enthusiasm to others."

HELAINE BLUMENFELD
sculptor of the marble "Spirit of Life" at Riverside Regional Medical Center

"He is absolutely an energetic visionary. His commitment to Newport News, particularly through the Newport News Public Art Foundation, is quite significant and distinguished; when all is said and done, and a few more years go by, Newport News will have a series of sculptures — thanks to Bobby — that very few cities the size of Newport News have. ... He's really dedicated himself to making Newport News a wonderful place to live."

JOHN HIGHTOWER
former president and CEO of, now consultant to, The Mariners' Museum, and a Port Warwick resident

Bobby Freeman's new restaurant, called Light, is in Port Warwick. PHOTO BY ADRIN SNIDER/DAILY PRESS

street front, moving the parking lot behind and siting his first public sculpture, "The Memory of Green," a 6-foot bronze, to one side.

"I think I have a knack for taking advantage of opportunities and delving right into something."

He has always had an affinity for sculpture, particularly figurative, since discovering dramatic bronzes — he recalls a lion attacking an alligator, "crazy stuff" — as a teenager visiting galleries in Paris and London. And he has always been impressed by the public art in his favorite city, New York.

He's not formally schooled in the subject, but typical of his straightforward, can-do style, he searched for "sculpture" on the Internet and found a festival in Providence, R.I., that he used as a model for the annual Port Warwick Art & Sculpture Festival, now entering its third year.

Typical, too, is his weaving of the personal into every project. After he came up with the name for Port Warwick from the novel "Lie Down in Darkness," he pursued a meeting and subsequent friendship with the now-deceased author William Styron. In the same way, he establishes a rapport with every artist whose work he commissions.

He first approached Japanese artist Masaru Bando ("The Memory of Green"), whom he met in New York, a bottle of good Italian wine in hand. Bando in turn introduced Freeman to the larger, international world of sculpture and pointed him toward Pietrasanta, Italy, where sculptors from around the world congregate to work with the local Carrara marble and in the bronze foundries. "In 10 days I learned more about sculpture than I could have in college in 10 years," says Freeman.

Since then he has established two nonprofit organizations — the Port Warwick Foundation and, at the behest of the mayor, the Newport News Public Art Foundation — committed to the purchase, display and preservation of monumental public sculpture.

He dubs himself as the curator, traveling, bringing back "mockettes," or miniatures of the sculpture, for board approval, and arranging for the artists to attend the unveilings in person. Now, he's working toward having the city set aside funds for public art in the construction costs of every public building.

"Major permanent sculpture is very expensive and very complicated — what you're going to put somewhere forever. You have to consider the materials. It takes a year to make, and then there's the site preparation, the shipping and the installation."

He adds, "It gets me excited. It's art for everyone, everyone experiences it. You don't have to do the intimidating thing of going to a museum and buying a ticket — it changes the fabric, the physical reality of where we live. It has a very different impact." When the next five pieces are installed, Freeman anticipates that everyone will start to feel the influence.

"It may sound crazy, but it's no more crazy than what's happened at Christopher Newport University."

"I never did just one thing. I was always going in different directions. I admire people who get dug in to just one thing."

So, just as he was germinating the idea of Port Warwick, starting to learn all he could about sculpture and public art, he was also serving as rector of Christopher Newport University, a position he held until 2003.

"You can't have a great city without a great university," he says. He considers his family's gift and service to the university as the most significant contribution they've made to the community. Their $1 million gift to what was then a "sleepy commuter college" gave it credibility and gave President Paul Trible's vision necessary tangible support.

The college then was shrinking, hurt by the likes of Strayer University cutting into its mission. Freeman believes that transforming CNU into a traditional four-year college infused necessary energy into the city.

Universities, he believes, "are a magnet for bringing new life to older cities, for bringing in a wonderful intellectual mix, and in this case an arts component that was lacking."

In order to have an impact the family agreed that "it had to be a big number. A million dollars made a statement in the way that $900,000 wouldn't have. It told people something was happening. It was one of the many pieces of the puzzle."

"I've lived here all my life. The city has crossed a divide."

Now Freeman sees a "sea change" in Newport News. It's on the cusp of making the transition from suburban to urban. It has become a vibrant city with lots of new people who are active and who with time will assume leadership roles in the community.

People can live anywhere, he notes. Now he feels that Newport News can compete with other cities for residents who have a choice of where to live.

In no small measure, that's because of the contributions Bobby Freeman makes to the place he chooses to call home. ■

ABOUT ROBERT L. "BOBBY" FREEMAN JR.

Family: Wife, Vicki Siokis Freeman; parents, Dorothy and Robert Freeman Sr.; sister, Susan Freeman Bryant.

Education: Undergraduate and graduate degrees in accounting from Virginia Tech. Law degree from Campbell University in North Carolina.

Work:

- Accountant at Coopers and Lybrand for a couple of years; left to attend law school.
- In 1981 started at the law firm of Jones, Blechman, Woltz and Kelly, the largest law firm on the Peninsula. Made partner in 1986; managing partner for five years.
- In 1998 established Tower Park Corp., a real estate development company, of which he is currently president; and Tower Park Management Corp., a commercial property management company of which he is chief executive officer. Tower Park Corp. specializes in the planning and implementation of mixed-use developments, office parks, shopping centers and residential projects. It is currently developing Port Warwick, a 153-acre, $500 million mixed-use community in Newport News.

Community:

- Member, Board of Directors of The Mariners' Museum in Newport News
- Member, Board of Visitors at his alma mater, Virginia Tech, in Blacksburg
- Founder and chair, Newport News Public Art Foundation
- Founder, Port Warwick Foundation

Past involvement:

- Past rector, Board of Visitors, Christopher Newport University
- Past chairman, Board of Directors of the Virginia International Terminals, a regional organization that operates the Ports of Virginia
- Past member, board of the Industrial Development Authority of the city of Newport News
- Past member, board of Harbor Bank, a publicly traded community bank in Newport News

▶ **CITIZEN OF THE YEAR** Continued from H1

Freeman's multifaceted efforts garnered award

wick, and as an outgrowth of his vision for it, Freeman has enhanced the entire city's image and its residents' quality of life through working tirelessly to bring monumental sculptures to public spaces. To ensure that the art enjoys a continued presence and will be enjoyed by future generations, he has helped establish two public, nonprofit organizations devoted to its display and preservation: the Port Warwick Foundation and the Newport News Public Art Foundation.

In combination, Freeman's development at Port Warwick and the public art programs he supports are changing how Newport News is viewed by residents and visitors alike. For his vision with these projects, and for his ongoing participation in the area's major educational and cultural organizations, Bobby Freeman Jr. is the Citizen of the Year. ■

ABOUT THE ORGANIZATIONS

Much of Bobby Freeman Jr.'s work to promote the arts is conducted through these organizations:

Newport News Public Art Foundation: A public, nonprofit organization, active for the past five years, whose purpose is to transform the visual appearance of the city of Newport News through the selection and location of major pieces of sculpture throughout the city. To this end, the foundation (www.nnpaf.org) has a mission to:

- Promote interest in public art.
- Commission and support new projects that integrate art, architecture and urban planning.
- Preserve and protect existing works of public art for future generations.

Since 2000, eight monumental sculptures have been placed in the city, including the 20-foot stainless steel "Reinventions" by Robert Lorenson, in Oyster Point, and the red granite "Lanape Gate" by Harry Gordon, one of five at Port Warwick.

The NNPAF is currently working on commissions for five more sculptures in steel, marble and bronze, which will be placed at the airport, City Center, police headquarters, CNU and the Main Street Library.

Freeman is chair of the foundation, which has a board of directors drawn from civic leaders and artists; its director is Laurel Tsirimokos.

Port Warwick Foundation: A public, nonprofit organization (portwarwick.com/pwfoundation) started two years ago; its board consists of a certain percentage of Port Warwick homeowners and business owners, and a cross-section of people and businesses outside Port Warwick; it sponsors the annual fall Port Warwick Art & Sculpture Festival (pwartfest.org).

The festival brings in monumental sculpture — last year's event showcased nine or 10 pieces — for temporary display; this year's event, the weekend of Oct. 13-14, hopes to draw a dozen or more. These works will cycle out each year for new works 30 days before the festival. The eventual goal is to line Loftis Boulevard with monumental sculpture to create a gateway into the festival.

The foundation anticipates partnering with the city with the goal of developing the festival into a regional event by 2011 and changing the name to The Newport News Art & Sculpture Festival.

Freeman founded the organization; its executive director is Denise Olsen.

Port Warwick Conservancy: The Port Warwick property owners' organization became independent of the developer this year; it will continue to offer free public concerts each week in Styron Square throughout the summer. The concerts start up again on the third Wednesday in May.

PAST DAILY PRESS CITIZENS OF THE YEAR

PRICE
2005 honoree

Exemplars of citizenship, embodiments of the ideals of service: These characteristics help define the diverse group of Citizens of the Year named by the Daily Press.

Here is the honor roll of those recognized since the award was established:

1989: William Roth
1990: Marcellus "Boo" Williams
1991: Walter Segaloff
1992: Lorraine Austin
1993: Robert Templin
1994: Mary Johnson
1995: Alan Witt
1996: Corrine Garland
1997: Troy Collier
1998: Jack Ezzell
1999: Gary Hamm
2000: Rona Altschuler
2001: Alan Diamonstein
2002: Harriet Storm
2003: The soldiers of the 7th Transportation Group at Fort Eustis who volunteer at An Achievable Dream
2004: Debbie Smith
2005: McKinley L. Price

DARWIN Continued from H1