

Best of the Quad Cities 2005: Introduction , Hall of Fame, and Major Awards

Written by No Author

Tuesday, 07 February 2006 18:00

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After a certain number of years, a community tends to get bored with something that once seemed exciting and new. Participation dwindles. This year marks the 10th that the River Cities' Reader has conducted its Best of the Quad Cities poll, yet community interest in this institution continues to grow. Even though we stopped printing paper ballots this year (instead fully converting to an online form), we received our largest number of valid submissions ever – 432, to be exact. (Last year, with a combination of printed ballots and online votes, we got 385 valid submissions. Voters must fill out responses to half the categories for a ballot to be counted.) Since 2002, the number of votes in our annual poll has grown 66 percent.

What keeps the poll fresh is that our community continues to change. New businesses and attractions open. New people come to the Quad Cities. Our tastes change. So for every Johnny's Italian Steakhouse that continues to clean up in our awards, there's a Hunter's Club – which unseated longtime favorite Boozies in the best burger category.

But the people who *choose* the Best of the Quad Cities truly distinguish it. So the *Reader* offers a hearty "thank you" to the hundreds of people who took the time and effort to vote in this year's poll. You're the best readers anybody could hope for.

Many thanks also to Brian Barkley, who photographed our winners except where noted.

Beyond the Hall of Fame and major-honor winners listed here, see pages dedicated to this year's winners in [Food & Drink](#) ; [Business](#) ; [Civics & Media](#) ; and [Arts, Culture, & Leisure](#)

Hall of Fame

Every year, somebody will inevitably ask why we don't include certain things in our annual Best of the Quad Cities poll. Where's best hardware store? How about record store? Or barbecue?

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The answer is a simple one: We didn't include those categories because the winners are foregone conclusions. Over the years, some winners have been as predictable and consistent as sunrise, and with huge margins that left no doubt. So we took those categories out and created a Best of the Quad Cities Hall of Fame.

It's an elite group. And while we didn't include these categories on our ballot this year, our four Hall of Fame businesses are always winners in our book.

- **Best record/CD store: Co-Op Records**
- **Best barbecue: Jim's Rib Haven**
- **Best selection of beer: Old Chicago**
- **Best Hardware Store: K&K True Value**

Best of the Quad Cities 2005 - Major Awards

Quad Citian of the Year

1. Chad Pregracke, Living Lands & Waters
2. Mike Whalen, Heart of America Restaurants & Inns
3. Lon Bozarth, River Music Experience

Quad Citian of the Year - Chad Pregracke

Chad Pregracke, the founder, driving force, dynamo, and public face of Living Lands & Waters, is a legitimate candidate for Quad Citian of the year every year. But 2005 was special. In addition to myriad river cleanups and education workshops – for a jaw-dropping list of accomplishments, visit <http://www.livinglandsandwaters.org/About/recap-2005.htm> – Pregracke responded to people in need at a time when most of us wondered what we could do.

When Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf coast in late August, Pregracke decided he wanted to help. He got the okay from the Living Lands & Waters board and staff, cancelled the group's fall schedule, and loaded up its barges with people, supplies, and building materials for a trip south on the Mississippi. The project was initially meant to last 30 days, but instead it stretched over nine weeks. "I kind of took on too much," Pregracke said. "I don't easily say, 'No, I can't help you.'" A crew of 18 people helped clean and repair roughly 70 houses in New Orleans and Mississippi. "They were still calling us [for help] after we left," he added.

The damage in areas affected by the hurricane was massive, and there's only so much a small crew can do. But Pregracke's goal was appropriately modest: "to have a big impact on the people we had contact with."

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Pregracke isn't slowing down. This year's activities include a six-week cleanup of the Chesapeake Bay, projects in Chicago and St. Louis, and plenty of trash-collecting along waterways in the Quad Cities. In addition, Living Lands & Waters is offering teacher workshops and is undertaking river-bottom forest restoration. Plus Living Lands & Waters will be at the Sturgis on the River festival this year, collecting recyclables that in past years have gone into the landfill.

Pregracke sums up his organization's work – and the main reason he was selected Quad Citian of the year – when he noted, without obvious pride or ego, "We're doing good."

– Jeff Ignatius –

Best-kept Quad Cities secret

1. Rocket Theatre
2. River Music Experience
3. Antonella's Pizzeria & Ristorante

Best damn thing about the Quad Cities

1. Mississippi River
2. The people
3. Bix Beiderbecke Memorial Jazz Festival

Restaurant

1. Centro (tie)
1. Johnny's Italian Steakhouse (tie)
3. Antonella's Pizzeria & Ristorante

Best restaurant (tie), Best upscale dining, Best steaks/steakhouse, Most romantic restaurant, Best atmosphere - Johnny's Italian Steakhouse

My conversation with Jack Viviani is becoming an annual occurrence. **Johnny's Italian Steakhouse**, the downtown Moline restaurant that Viviani manages, won four awards in last year's Best of the Quad Cities poll, and this year it's a five-time winner, tying for best restaurant and also taking home the titles for best upscale dining, best steaks/steakhouse, most romantic restaurant, and best atmosphere. Viviana said the restaurant's success comes down to two basic areas of emphasis: "Your food is still the best, and your service is still the best." Because Johnny's is part of Heart of America Restaurants & Inns, its menu doesn't change much; chain-wide alterations are time-consuming and expensive. Instead, the restaurant established its upscale 1950s supper-club template and stuck with it.

That doesn't mean there aren't tweaks. In the past year, Johnny's has expanded and changed its bar, Viviani said. The old bar sat nine people, while the new one holds 22 and has a U shape, allowing for more socializing. "It's more conducive to the [positive] guest experience," he said. And that's what Johnny's is all about.

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Jeff Ignatius

Local visual artist

1. Leo Kelly
2. Ralph Iaccarino
3. Heidi Hernandez

Local musical act

1. Jim the Mule
2. Metrolites (tie)
2. Wicked Liz & the Bellyswirls (tie)

Locally owned business

1. Ritzi Reruns
2. Rocket Theatre
3. Lagomarcino's Confectionary (tie)
3. Whitey's Ice Cream Stores (tie)

Best locally owned business - Ritzi Reruns

The female mannequins in **Ritzi Reruns'** front window are currently all gussied up for Valentine's Day – dressed in a vibrant array of magentas, fuchsias, and hot pinks – and it makes owner Sherry Hopkins' retail outlet look like it's positively blushing with pride. It might as well be. Since Hopkins purchased what she calls the "casual trendy" establishment six years ago, Ritzi Reruns (located at 1612 West Locust Street in Davenport) has been the go-to place for, as Hopkins says, "quality clothes for a fraction of retail price," with "clean, up-to-date, and all name-brand" items ranging from \$1 accessories to \$39 formalwear valued at \$250 – "and that's the *high-end* of our prices." The owner says that "a lot of our regulars become our friends," so it makes sense that word-of-mouth has generated terrific business – and terrific *return* business – for Ritzi Reruns, providing values for high schoolers, seniors, and everyone in between. However, Hopkins understands that her customers can be a little, shall we say, *possessive* about the store. "People sometimes don't *want* to tell their friends where they got such great items!" she laughs. "They want to keep us all to themselves!" For further information, call (563)322-8684.

– **Mike Schulz**

Annual event/festival

1. Bix Beiderbecke Memorial Jazz Festival
2. Mississippi Valley Blues Fest
3. WQPT Brew-Ha-Ha