



James Brownell "Jess"

November 22, 1935 - December 28, 2024

James "Jess" Brownell, aged 89, died on December 29, 2024, in Milwaukee, WI. A longtime resident of Milwaukee's East Side, Jess was admired by a wide circle of friends for his dry wit, keen insights and prodigious knowledge of literature, politics, art, and, of course, sports. His memory for names, places, and events – real and fictional – was vast. “Jess will know” was a daily refrain.

Jess devoted much of his life to words, as both an avid reader and artful prose stylist. Over six decades Jess wrote dozens of novels, plays, librettos, and short stories. Midwestern Noir detectives, operas about interstellar conflict and the Irish potato famine, dystopian political thrillers, and characters at the local bar – all emerged delightfully from his pen.

Equally comfortable at an art exhibit or the horse races, watching the Packers or discussing Chekhov, Jess participated deeply in the cultural life of his adopted home of Milwaukee. His intelligence, equanimity, kindness, humor, and curiosity extended to everyone he met.

Jess was born on November 22, 1935 in Sioux City, Iowa, the only child of Jesse and Edna (née Lindberg) Brownell. He grew up on the family farm near Wakefield, Nebraska, where he attended a oneroom school. After graduating from Wakefield High School, he enrolled at the University of

Nebraska. He joined the Theta Xi fraternity and contributed regularly to The Daily Nebraskan. Jess was a veteran of the US Army, serving in West Germany from 1958-1960. As part of the post-war peacekeeping forces, he quipped that he participated in the “famous Bavarian Gasthaus campaign.”

He moved to Milwaukee in the early 1960s to launch an alternative newspaper, the 12th Street Rag, with Bruce Brugmann, who went on to found the SF Bay Guardian. Jess worked for the Cramer-Krasselt advertising agency and then for the City of Milwaukee, first on the Bicentennial Commission and later as the manager of the renowned Pabst Theater. He served on the Wisconsin Arts Board and was a lifelong patron of the local performing arts.

Quietly but seriously committed to his community, Jess was a key figure in multiple political campaigns from the 1970s through the 1990s, notably as a writer of campaign literature for offices ranging from the local school board to Governor of Wisconsin. It was there that he met Shirley, who remained thereafter by his side as wife and fellow traveler.

Jess will be sorely missed by his many friends, the Lake Park Picnic Group, and three generations of his dear adopted family at the "Broderick Arms".

Jess is survived by his wife of 38 years, Shirley Conlon, and the children of his previous marriage to Audrey (née Bacher) Brownell, son Jason Brownell (Rita), and daughter, Jessica Brownell.

From too much love of living,
From hope and fear set free,
We thank with brief thanksgiving
Whatever gods may be

That no life lives for ever;
That dead men rise up never;
That even the weariest river
Winds somewhere safe to sea.
- Swinburne, "The Garden of Proserpine"

A celebration of Jess's life is being planned for spring 2025. Please see northshorefuneral.com for details.

Tribute Wall

JF

“ Dear Shirley,
I just learned of Jesse’s death. He was a wonderful man and I feel privileged to have known him. Your relationship was beautiful to witness. So sorry.

Judith M Friebert - June 24, 2025 at 06:54 PM

PS

“ Jess’ easy presence first caught my attention years ago at one of the “Broderick compound” Parties.
Sure enough, this soft-spoken savant, was also a Green and Gold repository of lore and more.
Later I learned of his political prowess.
Dignified gentleman Jess Brownell rest in peace.

Pat Small - April 07, 2025 at 10:47 PM