

Joan Abrams, 69, dies; noted Block Island hotelier

BLOCK ISLAND — Joan (Dressler) Abrams, 69, owner of several well-known restaurants and hotels on the island and whose vision and creativity made her a leader in the Rhode Island hospitality industry, died Thursday at Miriam Hospital, Providence.



She was the wife of Justin E. Abrams. Born in Providence, a daughter of the late Joseph and Sarah (Weisman) Dressler, she had lived in Providence and on Block Island and was a frequent visitor to a family home in Costa Rica. She graduated from Hope High School and attended Bryant College.

The Abrams family started visiting Block Island in the 1960s, sailing their 28-foot boat from East Greenwich. They bought a run-down rooming house, and renovated and renamed it The 1661 Inn.

In 1972, the family purchased the Manisses Hotel, a derelict Victorian inn built in 1876, and restored it over the next several years. In recent years, the family had also run the Oar and Smuggler's Cove restaurants.

Through Mrs. Abrams's vision, The 1661 Inn and Hotel Manisses became well known as two of the finest hotels on Block Island.

Mrs. Abrams was well known for her creative decorating and design abilities, and for her interest in promoting the culinary arts.

In 1989, Gourmet magazine said, "Without doubt, the Abrams(es) and their entire family helped pioneer the current Block Island renaissance."

The hotels were frequently written up in the national and regional magazines, including Gourmet, Bon Appetit, New York Magazine, Mademoiselle, and Yankee.

Longtime friend Shirley Kessler called Mrs. Abrams an "entrepreneur and an innovator."

The Abramses "saw properties (on Block Island) that were interesting to them, and could see from that what perhaps the island could become."

Beyond running what Kessler called "a first-class operation all the way," Mrs. Abrams and her family "were also very charitable to the island ... to all denominations.

They were always giving of themselves."

David DePetrillo, director of the State Tourism Council and a longtime friend, told the Block Island Times, "I consider Joan one of the pioneers of Rhode Island tourism. She was one of a handful of persons who had a vision of what tourism could become in Rhode Island."

DePetrillo called Mrs. Abrams "a natural innkeeper."

Over the years, Mrs. Abrams was active in many industry associations. She was past president of the Block Island Tourism Council, and the South County Tourism Council, and a member of the board of directors of the Independent Inn Keepers Association and the Rhode Island Hospitality and Tourism Association.

In 1996, former Gov. Lincoln Almond presented Mrs. Abrams the Rhode Island Tourism Award, and in 1998 the Hospitality Association honored her with its Hotelier of the Year Award. She and her husband were honored last year on Conservancy Day by the Block Island Conservancy.

She was also active in many other community activities in the 1960s and 1970s, including the PTA when her three children were young. She was vice president of the Sisterhood at Temple Beth-El.

She became president of the Rhode Island Ostomy Association after a personal experience with the surgery, making frequent visits to help patients who had also undergone the surgery.

She was a member of the Sons and Daughters of Ruth on Block Island, and Temple Beth-El in Providence.

The Abramses bought a home in Costa Rica in 1990, where they frequently stayed, often during the winter.

Besides her husband, she leaves a daughter, Rita Draper of Block Island; two sons, Mark Abrams of Sao Paulo, Brazil, and Rick Abrams of Lexington, Mass.; a brother, Abbott Dressler of Providence; a sister, Priscilla Krasnow of Warwick; and eight grandchildren. She was the sister of the late Maurice and Sidney Dressler.

The funeral service will be held tomorrow at 11 a.m. in Temple Beth-El in Providence. Burial will be in Block Island Cemetery.

ABRAMS, Joan (Dressler)

April 3, 2003. Beloved wife of Justin E. Abrams. Residence: Block Island and Providence. Dear mother of Rita Draper, Block Island; Mark Abrams, Sao Paulo, Brazil; and Rick Abrams, Lexington, Ma. Loving sister of Abbott Dressler, Providence; Priscilla Krasnow, Warwick; and the late Maurice and Sidney Dressler. Devoted grandmother of Kyle, Seth, Ross, Sam, Philip, Archie, Stanley and Sydney. Funeral Service 11:00 am Monday at Temple Beth-El, 70 Orchard Ave., Providence with burial to follow on Block Island at 4:00 pm. Relatives and friends are invited. In lieu of flowers, contributions may be made to the Block Island Conservancy, Box 84 Block Island, RI 02807. Shiva to be observed at the home of Yvonne Dressler Kaufman, 56 Alton Rd Providence, Tuesday 2- and 7-9 pm. The family was assisted with the arrangements by the SUGARMAN-SINA MEMORIAL CHAPEL.