Dante Stephensen, 84, iconic Atlanta restaurateur

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By Martha Anne Tudor

Behind one of the most outlandish dining venues in Atlanta history was a first-generation American grounded in simple values and the desire to help others get ahead.
Danté’s Down the Hatch dazzled Atlanta patrons for 43 years with live crocodiles in a pool, a theatrical ship setting, award-winning jazz and participatory fondue dining. Creator and owner Danté Stephensen oversaw every detail of the Underground and Buckhead operations, but was never too busy to lose sight of the lives around him. Known as “hatchlings,” employees were treated like family and often stayed for decades, rare in a profession known for high stress and high turnover.

Stephensen died July 26 from pancreatic cancer. Relatives plan to hold a memorial service in the future. H.M. Patterson & Son – Oglethorpe Hill Chapel is in charge of arrangements.

Emotions hit former staffers hard as they recalled the impact Stephensen and his restaurant had on their lives.

“I was sitting by a pond drinking my morning coffee when I heard the news of his passing. I cried,” said Cynzia Sanchez, who was 22 and still struggling to learn English when Stephensen hired her as hostess in the early 1980s. She had just moved to Atlanta from her home in Puerto Rico to study architecture at the Georgia Institute of Technology, a program she completed with Stephensen’s encouragement.

“Just the fact I was part of Danté’s for a couple of years made me always feel special. He inspired me. Seeing what he created at that restaurant made me believe I could do something unique as well,” said Sanchez, now an architect, artist, and inn owner in Maxeys, Ga.

“I wanted him to see what I’ve done. I know he would’ve been proud of me.”

Stephensen was born Danté Michael Shapiro in Chicago in 1935, amid the Great Depression, to parents who stressed using mind and imagination. His mother, a native of Denmark, was a pioneer of the Montessori education system. His father, a native of Ukraine, was a concert pianist, composer, and orchestra conductor. Money was tight, and the values of work, integrity and equality were instilled. He changed his name to Danté Shapiro Stephensen in his 30s, in a nod to his Danish heritage.

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During his youth, Stephensen fell in love with trains, watching them travel the Chicago & Northwestern Railway that ran by his house. In Atlanta, he purchased a vintage railroad car previously owned by F.W. Woolworth in 1982, making it his fulltime residence until his death.

“I used to see these old cars going by on the rear of the more elegant trains when I wasn’t even wealthy enough to buy a coach ticket. It’s a childhood thing, and it’s been with me my whole life,” Stephensen said in an interview with Smithsonian Magazine in 2004. He often greeted diners of Danté’s wearing a conductor’s hat, and trains were featured prominently throughout the restaurant, among other eclectic decorations from the around the world and nation.

After earning a degree in geology at Carleton College in Minnesota, Stephensen entered the U.S. Navy and became a member of the first Navy SEAL team. Family members said they did not even know he liked to swim.
The values of his upbringing, the coolness under pressure learned as a SEAL, and introduction to fondue on a trip to the Swiss Alps formed the basis for Danté’s Down the Hatch and its culture of respect. Menus were available in 63 languages. Flags from every country were on display.

"Dante believed it's hard work that differentiates people," said nephew Gary Scott, a banker in Auburndale, Mass.

“It didn’t matter to him the color of your skin, your sexual orientation, or your social status. Treating people like they mattered — that’s a trademark of Danté’s.”

Scott received no special treatment when he worked for his uncle on school breaks. He scraped gum off tables and cleaned urinals, a lesson in humility and attitude he said prepared him for life.

“Danté believed you don’t waste time complaining because that’s time you could be accomplishing something,” Scott said.

Working seven days a week left Stephensen little time to waste. Employees say he always made time to offer advice or ask about their lives, however. He encouraged them to continue their education. He gave them parties, outings, and tickets to sporting events. He offered profit-sharing plans and bonuses for those at every level.
Danté’s location in Underground closed in 1999. When he sold the Buckhead restaurant to a developer and shut its doors in 2013, Stephensen gave every employee the equivalent of one year’s pay.

“Everyone who worked for Danté felt like they were in a big family,” said Mark Harris, who managed the Buckhead location for 33 years.

The staff was treated like family, and they started families. Among those who met working at Danté’s, there have been 56 marriages, and many whose children grew up to also work there.

“Danté loved bringing people together. He’d get on an elevator of strangers and get off with new friends,” said Jerry Margolis, who met his wife of 47 years when both worked at the restaurant.

“Danté’s integrity and kindness are unheard of in this industry,” said Gerry Klaskala, chef and co-owner of acclaimed restaurants Aria and Canoe.

“Everyone who worked for Danté revered and loved him. They knew no one would take better care of them.”

Stephensen’s survivors include his brother, David Scott of Dover, NH; nephew Gary Scott of Auburndale, Mass.; and nieces Valeria Scott Laitinen of Athens, Greece, Robin Scott of Somerville, Mass., and Holly Wirick of Lakewood, Colo.