

Las Vegas Sun

**FRANK FERTITTA JR. | 1938-2009:**

# Station Casinos founder left his mark as philanthropist

By [Jeff German](#) ([contact](#))

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Just days ago, [Station Casinos](#) founder [Frank Fertitta Jr.](#) was telling family members he needed to rearrange the furniture in his room. That television, for instance, should be moved over a few feet, he said.

It was the typically creative Fertitta, always looking to improve things, his friend of 50 years, Tito Tiberti, said.

The room in this case was at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles, where he was being treated for a long-standing heart condition. Fertitta died there early Friday at age 70.

The publicity-shy Fertitta will be remembered for both his vision and his philanthropy as a businessman, turning a small casino just off the Strip into a casino empire that catered to locals while most of his counterparts focused on tourists, and then pouring much of his profit into schools, charities and medical research. Over the years he has donated millions of dollars to UNLV, the Clark County School District and one of his favorite beneficiaries, Bishop Gorman High School, which his children and grandchildren attended.



Frank Fertitta Jr.

“Frank was one of the most successful businesspersons in the history of Las Vegas — and one of the great philanthropists of our community,” Las Vegas Mayor Oscar Goodman said. “He was a very special guy, a class act. He was sophisticated, quiet and unassuming, a master businessman.”

Michael Green, a history professor at the College of Southern Nevada, said Fertitta correctly saw that with the growth of the casino industry on the Strip, the locals market would grow as well.

“He knew that the people who worked in the Strip resorts would want a neighborhood place to play,” Green said. “He’s an original of our time, one of the last old-time, down to earth operators who helped lead the transition to the new Las Vegas.”

Frank Fertitta Jr. started his Las Vegas career as an hourly employee working for tips, and he never looked back.

Born Oct. 30, 1938, in Beaumont, Texas, Fertitta arrived in Las Vegas with his wife, Vicki, in 1960 from Galveston, Texas, and landed a job as a bellman at the Tropicana. By 1976, he had worked his way up the ranks of the industry, holding jobs such as dealer, pit boss, baccarat manager and eventually general manager at several casinos, including the [Stardust](#), the [Tropicana](#), [Circus Circus](#), the [Sahara](#) and the [Fremont](#).

In July 1976, Fertitta opened his first casino, which he called simply The Casino, a 5,000-square-foot establishment on West Sahara Avenue that catered to locals with a friendly atmosphere and strong customer service. A year later, he added bingo to the mix and changed the name of The Casino to the Bingo Palace.

Las Vegas attorney Frank Schreck, who helped Fertitta get his first gaming license, said the Bingo Palace thrived by offering inexpensive food, cheap drinks, good entertainment and an endless array of casino giveaways.

“He was a real innovator,” Schreck said. “He was always polite to everybody, and that’s why his casinos were always successful. They reflected his personality.”

As the popularity of the Bingo Palace grew, so did the Bingo Palace, and in 1983, Fertitta changed the name of the casino to [Palace Station](#).

As the casino continued to expand, his sons Frank Fertitta III and Lorenzo Fertitta became executives with the company. In 1993, the elder Fertitta retired, but stayed active in other family businesses, as his sons took the casino company public. The company went private again in 2007, just before the economic downturn, which has forced it to seek bankruptcy protection.

As [Station Casinos](#), the family-controlled company amassed an empire of 10 major properties — including opulent suburban resorts in [Green Valley](#), [Summerlin](#) and [Aliante](#).

Retired Boyd Gaming Corp. Chairman Bill Boyd, one of Fertitta’s longtime competitors, called Fertitta a “trailblazer” in the industry who paved the way for his own company.

“We really appreciate everything he did,” Boyd said. “He was liked by everybody in the industry. He was just a wonderful human being.”

The tributes poured in Friday on the news of Fertitta’s death.

“He and his family have built a great legacy in our state’s resort and gaming industry,” Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid said. “Frank has always been a leader in giving back to the community and I am proud to see his sons, Frank III and Lorenzo, follow in their father’s footsteps. My sympathies go out to the entire Fertitta family as they mourn the loss of a great man.”

Former Nevada Gov. Bob Miller said Fertitta was “one of the most community-minded and generous men in Las Vegas history,” who made Las Vegas “a better place for others and their families.”

Rep. Shelley Berkley, D-Nev., said Fertitta “helped create the modern city of Las Vegas. He’s been an extraordinary entrepreneur. Not only a leader in the community but a philanthropist second to none.”

The Fertitta family's efforts on behalf of public education are well known, said Joyce Haldeman, associate superintendent of community and government relations for the Clark County School District.

In 1998, when the district's \$3.5 billion bond measure was facing a tough battle for voter support, Fertitta posted "Vote Yes" on the marquee of every Station property.

"It was that kind of community support that made a difference," Haldeman said.

Individual Station casinos also are known for adopting a local at-risk school and dispatching employees to serve as volunteers and mentors.

Last year the company donated more than \$1 million to campuses. Fertitta Middle School, which opened in 2003, was named after the family patriarch.

John Kilduff, president of Bishop Gorman High School, described Fertitta as a "splendid man in every way."

"He touched so many lives with his generosity and warmth, it's hard to imagine we will see another like him," Kilduff said. "There would be no new Bishop Gorman High School campus without the tremendous generosity and support of Frank and his family. He may have left us but his spirit lives on because of his sincerity and love of community."

Over the years Fertitta and his family have contributed to the Nevada Cancer Institute, Opportunity Village, Catholic Charities of Southern Nevada, St. Jude Ranch and the Cleveland Clinic Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health.

Larry Ruvo, the center's founder and a longtime friend of Fertitta, said without Fertitta's financial support, the center would not have had the success it currently enjoys.

"He had a passion for life. He had a passion for family, and he had something else — a passion for helping others," Ruvo said. "He didn't know any boundaries. He just knew when people needed help, he was there."

Former Gov. Kenny Guinn said Fertitta never sought publicity for his philanthropic ventures and preferred to stay under the radar. "If he told you he was going to do something, all you needed was a handshake, and he would get it done," Guinn said.

Fertitta is survived by his wife of 51 years, Victoria; daughter Delise Sartini; sons Frank Fertitta III and Lorenzo Fertitta; sisters Olivia Deppe and Linda Ramirez; and nine grandchildren, Blake Sartini II, Lorenzo Sartini, Sandra Sartini, Kelley-Ann Fertitta, Victoria Fertitta, Frank Fertitta IV, Lorenzo Fertitta Jr., Nicco Fertitta and Angelia Fertitta. He was preceded in death by his brother Joseph.

Funeral plans are pending.

Sun reporters Mary Manning, Emily Richmond and J. Patrick Coolican contributed to this story.

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