

Bruce Deifik, former Ocean Resort owner, dies in crash after Colorado Rockies game

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Bruce Deifik, the former Ocean Resort Casino owner who gambled on one of Atlantic City's most troubled properties, died Sunday in Colorado.

Deifik was driving home Sunday from a Colorado Rockies baseball game in his hometown of Denver when he died in a car crash, his attorney Paul O'Gara said. The Denver Police Department confirmed a traffic fatality Sunday in which a motorist had an "apparent medical condition" and swerved over two lanes of traffic before crashing into a light pole.

Deifik, 64, was the face of Ocean Resort, where he would often be seen on the casino floor interacting with guests and employees.

His likeness was plastered on promotional gaming dollars, known as "Bruce's Bucks," during the initial days of the casino's opening.

He and his wife, Nancy, maintained a temporary residence in a top-floor suite; the family had no comment Monday.

Deifik's effort at resurrecting the former Revel Casino was part of the city rebirth narrative last year, as Ocean and Hard Rock Hotel & Casino raced to open in the summer of 2018. But while popular, the property failed to generate enough profits to satisfy investors.

Allegations of sexual harassment and mounting debt led to his exit as investors took control of the property in mid-January.

"We are saddened to learn that Bruce Deifik, former owner of Ocean Casino Resort, has passed away," said Diane Spiers, a spokeswoman for the property, via email Monday. "The Ocean family is grateful for Bruce having the vision to reopen this beautiful oceanfront property and employing over 3,000 members of our community. Our thoughts and prayers are with his family."

Deifik and his company AC Ocean Walk LLC paid \$229 million for Ocean Resort in January 2018, purchasing the former Revel Casino Hotel from Florida-based real estate developer Glenn Straub.

Under Deifik's control, the property, which had been closed since 2014 after only two years of operation, reopened on June 27 along with Hard Rock.

But Ocean struggled to gain a significant market share among Atlantic City's nine properties. In February, state gaming regulators revealed Ocean had lost nearly \$23 million in the final months of 2018 and that the property was not in compliance with strict financial conditions.

In mid-January, Luxor Capital Group, a New York-based hedge fund which had financed a significant portion of Deifik's original investment, assumed control of Ocean Resort. A trustee is overseeing the property until the ownership transfer is completed, something that could happen within the next few weeks.

Despite leaving the area, Deifik was still in contact with those with whom he had built relationships in the resort.

Mike Lopez, of Atlantic City, and Deifik became close friends in just a short period of time.

Lopez and Deifik's family shared Thanksgiving dinner together and the two men were planning to attend a baseball game in Denver later this month.

"After he went back to Colorado, I would send him a picture at least once a week of the sunrise over (Ocean Resort) along with an inspirational message," Lopez said Monday. "Bruce was just a great guy (and) his entire family was the best. ... He considered everyone his Ocean family. I just can't believe it."

Late Monday morning, the casino was running as it normally does, with players pulling at slots and grabbing drinks at the bar. Around them, the news of Deifik's death was circulating among the employees walking the floor.

"It's starting to spread," said David Pagan, a blackjack dealer at the casino. "Just when I came in now, actually, somebody had texted me the article. And now I tell one person and they're like, 'I heard, it's crazy.'"

Employees expressed shock and sadness at the reports of the former casino chief's passing.

Pagan described Deifik as a "very kind, family-oriented guy."

Bartender Elvin Echevarria said Deifik was good to those who worked for him.

"If you were doing your job, he never bothered anyone," Echevarria said. "And he wasn't on top of people, looking for (mistakes)."

That feeling wasn't universal.

State gaming regulators were preparing to revoke Deifik's gaming license, but adjourned the action, set to take place Wednesday, after learning of his death.

The Casino Control Commission action was in response to a Division of Gaming Enforcement complaint in which Deifik was accused of sexually harassing two female employees. The complaint, filed Feb. 1, revealed how regulators sought to minimize his involvement in daily operations shortly before control was turned over to investors in mid-January.

Deifik, who lived at Ocean Resort between the property's opening in June 2018 and early January, was relegated to his suite after 9 p.m. without 24-hour notice to gaming regulators, according to the complaint.

He was also barred from the employee cafeteria and prohibited from direct communication with nonsenior staff other than a "usual and customary exchange of greetings."

O'Gara, Deifik's attorney, said the filing "was just a complaint," and declined to comment further.

Staff writers Colt Shaw and David Weinberg contributed to this report, as did The Associated Press.

