

Legacies of Topeka South Rotary

A Tribute to Dr. Gerald “Jerry” Bergen, 1933 – 2014



Jerry Bergen might have been a Super Hero, I don't know. He sure had the "mild mannered" part down to a "t". I know for certain he was once the WIBW secret Santa.

Jerry was born (1933) and raised in Marysville, KS -- eighty years old when he passed away last February. His family lived in a farmhouse; but, it was during the depression, and the land wasn't farmed.

Jerry was a Charter Member of Topeka South; and, since 1986, was always one of the early morning arrivers. A bad knee slowed him a bit these last two years; but for a lot of years, he typically arrived before seven.

He graduated high school in Marysville and was drafted into the Army in 1953. He served a two year hitch, mostly in Germany. He had a good head for numbers. The Army used him in a Fire-Direction Control unit for 105mm, Howitzers. Under field conditions, he learned to rapidly find map coordinates of a target; then, bark directions to his Howitzer teammates: the amount of explosive powder to place in each shell, what sort of fuse to insert, and the number of degrees of elevation and deflection of the cannon barrel, to hit its target.

He completed his hitch, married and attended Ottawa on the G. I. Bill. In search of more educational opportunities, he enrolled at Kansas State (... where tuition was cheaper!). He earned his bachelor's degree and began work as a junior high teacher in Abilene in 1958, the year, Kevin, his first child, was born. The job paid \$3,500 per year; and an extra \$100 for helping to coach football, baseball and track.

Two more children followed in '59 and '60; but, Jerry and his wife divorced in 1965. By then, he was Asst Dir of Financial Aid, Awards and Veteran Services at K-State.

He had custody of his three children when he met and married Betsy in 1967. He proposed to her in a two-page poem. (A copy of which, she still has.) Betsy had two children... so, they instantly, became a large family.

Betsy earned her PhD from K-State (as, did her mother, which was unusual for her generation); and, Jerry soon earned his PhD. Jerry and Betsy passed along their love of learning to their children. Betsy's son earned his Master's and his son, James, their oldest grandchild, earned his PhD.

Jerry's acumen with numbers was his strength. His job as Manager of Financial Analysis for the Board of Regents, brought the family to Topeka. That's the position he had when Topeka South Rotary began. Some of you will remember that in later years, Jerry managed an alcohol and substance abuse program for 501.

As a university professor, Betsy lectured world-wide. And, she was able to coordinate travel so Jerry could often travel with her. Many of the foreign Rotary banners we have in our TSR collection came from Jerry.

My best Rotary story about Jerry was really precipitated by Betsy:

Her field was human sexuality. She lectured on perspectives including cultural anthropology, mores, practices and techniques. Those last two were pretty much over the top for a morning breakfast club; but, she didn't tone things down a bit when she presented a program at Topeka South. Membership was all men, then. But, that morning we mostly morphed into sixth-grade boys. The more Betsy talked, the more embarrassing her subject matter became. Jerry started shielding his eyes and slid down in his chair, surely, questioning his wisdom for inviting her to present her program.

As she concluded and the "shock" of her program subsided, one member, who should remain nameless, looked over at Jerry and asked (just as the din of the adjourning crowd quieted), "Jerry... you do all that stuff?" His question reverberated; so, it was heard by just about everyone. Jerry had no quick answer, just silence, a sheepish look, and a quick exit.

I never heard Jerry speak harshly or speak ill of anyone. True to the State Song of Kansas, I never heard a discouraging word.

If you attended Topeka Civic Theatre, you probably saw Jerry volunteering... all cleaned up, decked out in his tuxedo and looking distinguished. No hint that the boy grew up on a Marysville farm, on land that defied farming, with no running water until he was nine years old.

*– Jim Rose, Topeka South Rotary
June 27, 2014*