

Eulogy for Joseph Cowden West

Written by Garron West

for Joe's Memorial Service

September 9, 2007 at 2:00 pm

The Unitarian Universalist Church of Birmingham, AL.

Read by The Rev. Wm. Leggett and Dr. Juanzetta Flowers

(Bill) Joseph Cowden West entered this world in June 1930 in Marietta, GA; he was the middle child of what would total a family of 13 children. This was during the depths of the Great Depression so he experienced a hard-scrabble daily existence, but somehow, the value of education abided in him. His long-suffering mother Zora must surely have provided this core, as his father having been "gassed" in WWI, spent extended time in VA hospitals, and did not set positive examples even when he was present. The local Baptist preacher in rural Blount Co told Joe about Howard College in B'ham, and with absolutely no outside financial help, he put himself successfully through 2 years in Pre-Med by selling ladies shoes in downtown B'ham and by joining the Alabama Air National Guard. This was a period of time of extreme frugality for Joe, for Howard College, being a private school - and nobody ever suggested that he apply for financial aid - was substantially more expensive than a state school would have been.

(Juanzetta) The Korean "Conflict" sidetracked Joe from college, and he was sent to the newly-established School of Aviation Medicine and was in the first graduating class. He rose to the rank of Staff Sgt. and had responsible positions. One such position was as Asst. to the Flight Surgeon on several air bases. His commanding officer in Denver wanted to put Joe in for OCS - Officer Candidate School - but this would have extended his time in the Air Force, so Joe declined. His goal was to return to college and complete his undergraduate degree in preparation for applying for Medical School.

(B) However, "Cupid" had entered Joe's life and he had the added responsibility of providing for a wife and soon his first child, Linda Carole, was born. Therefore, he switched his major to Biochemistry - which potentially would have allowed him to get into Med School if "his ship came in" - and he was in the first class of newly-minted ex-GI's to enter Auburn Univ. in 1952. His ship, in this regard, failed to come in, so he was awarded his undergraduate degree in 1955. By that time a second baby had entered his home, Joseph C. West, Jr., advanced graduate schooling was out of the question at this point as he had to provide for his stay-at-home wife and two toddlers.

(J) A brief period at Celanese Corp. was followed by his life-long love at Abbott Laboratories in North Chicago, Ill. He moved his family to Illinois in their 27 ft., 1947 house trailer. Their third child, Paul Raeburn, was born shortly after their arrival in Illinois. Seven years later, his bonus baby, Charles Frederick, completed the household. Joe was selected to enter Abbott's intense managerial technical training program, after which more diverse and interesting opportunities were his. He was the youngest manager of multiple departments at Abbott and he earned the deep respect of upper management, his peers, and

his workers. A Note: Joe hired the very first woman Chemical Operator in the history of the company, followed shortly by the first black Chemical Operator who had been shelved in Housekeeping - but Joe avidly went to bat to give this enterprising man a leg up. These Operators sang his praises at Joe's retirement dinner. Joe continued formal coursework as part-time student in Chicago as he juggled employment, family activities, and church work.

(B) For 15 years he rose into upper management in Chemical Manufacturing and he was extremely pleased his latter 15 years to be assigned Senior Research Scientist where he spear-headed numerous life-saving, life-extending products. The two which gave him personally the greatest satisfaction and elevated visibility were: Heparin, an anticoagulant derived from swine intestines/beef lungs, which makes open-heart surgery possible; and Survanta, a lung surfactant which has saved and vastly improved the lives of premature babies. He spent extended time in Japan fine-tuning the process, returned to North Chicago where he designed and built the multi-million plant for its manufacture. He brought his product to the stage for clinical trials, and Survanta was fully FDA-approved shortly after his retirement. He was considered by "insiders" to be the world expert on both of these crucial products. He served as paid consultant for a period of time after relocating to Ala. What a shifting of gears the move to rural Alabama was in 1989!!!

(J) While a student at Auburn Univ. (1952-1955) Joe came in contact with members of the Church of Christ. When the second child was born, the ladies of the church were very kind, bringing food and a few items of clothing and were simply nice and caring. While Joe was out of state on a job interview - Eli Lily, Indianapolis, Ind - Garron joined that church and Joe followed suit shortly thereafter. Neither Joe nor Garron ever did anything in half-way measures, so they entered wholeheartedly into this group and their active participation continued for 25 years. THE C of C provided stability, fellowship and a safe haven in which to raise their family. Both taught many Bible classes, VBS, and Joe served as an Elder - top function in local unit - but the sustaining element was Fallhall Glen, Wisconsin Christian Youth Camp near Black River Falls. Joe served on the Board of Directors for 12-15 yrs. and drove regularly to Madison for meetings. Both Joe and Garron helped man camping sessions for over a decade. Although his involvement with C & C terminated, grandchildren continued camping there for over a decade more and Joe still sends donations to their appeals for funds.

(B) Having severed this long-term attachment with fundamentalists, Joe and Garron were "un-churched" for 12 years, which bridged the time of building their retirement home in Alabama. Son, Charles sang professionally for the Evanston, Ill. Unitarian Universalist church and he suggested in the early 1990's that his parents investigate UU - if there be such in Ala!!! What a wonderful suggestion. Following a call for info. data on Labor Day 1993, and first visit the end of Nov. '93, Joe and Garron were amazed to find their "home - the rest of that aspect is history.

(J) You can take the boy off the farm, but can't take the farm out of the boy" - true adage. Joe farmed for family food and some college money early in his life, had a garden

while at Auburn, always had at least some tomato plants growing by the door and affiliated for 17 years with the Libertyville, Ill. Men's Garden, an organization of over 100 avid gardeners. He served in various functions, was president several times and continued to feed his family with his efforts. Actually, his active gardening for food only came to a halt upon purchase of our condo in B'ham.

(B) Did you know that Joe was an architect? Well, he was!! Upon hiring a Jefferson County hot-shot architect who took him to the cleaners, Joe took various classes at local community college in Illinois on aspects of home design, up-to-date building materials, blue print reading, etc. and designed his own home in the woods and on the lake. We already had in mind various elements we wanted to incorporate into the dwelling, so he took the ball and ran with it. He served as his own general contractor, sought out top sub-contractors for each phase of the job. Landscaping the grounds was high on Joe's priority list, so he and Garron enrolled in Auburn Univ.'s Master Gardening program to learn thoroughly Ala. horticulture. They also landscaped Pell City's Civic Center, and two St. Claire Co. Habitat for Humanity homes. Along about this same time Joe and G. also were active in PAL's - People Against Litter - and supervised folks working off time doing community service cleaning highways.

(J) In addition to all the above discussed activities of Joe's life, he and Garron ran Westiques for 15 or more years. This was an antiques business which consisted of going on the road with beautiful treasures for any where from 3-8 shows per year.

Although Joe was perpetually active and busy, he kept the sanctity of his home as the pillar of his life and he and Garron forged a tight bond which started when they met in 1948 at Lowe's Roller Skating Rink on Third Avenue in Birminham. Garron was 15 and Joe had just turned 18. Outside challenges and problems could come and go, but the granite base of their relationship never wavered. It is still going strong as we say good-bye to Joe today.