



Theodore Clark Johnson

February 18, 1925 - April 18, 2019

Theodore Clark Johnson, longtime Gunnison, Colorado resident and Emeritus Professor at Western State University, known to his students as “T.C.” and “Doc”, died Thursday, April 18, 2019, in Salt Lake City, Utah at the age of 94. His daughter and son-in-law were by his side.

Ted was born in Rockford, Illinois on February 14, 1925 to Emil Gustaf and Faith J. (Bettis) Johnson. Ted is survived by his daughter Candice Ann Johnson (Edward Ashwood) of Park City, Utah and Denver, Colorado; grandson, Sage Clark Johnson (Joellen) and great grandsons Piven Clark and Cohen James of Machesney Park (Rockford), Illinois. Four nephews and one niece also survive him. He was preceded in death by his wife Dorothy and son Michael Clark Johnson.

Born and raised in Rockford, Illinois, Ted lived in a two-story flat on Longwood Street, together with his parents and maternal grandparents as an only child. His father worked as shop foreman at Rockford Drop Forge.

Ted did not excel academically in high school, but that would change in later life. As a teenager, his passion was athletics. Ted was on the track team and the star center of the Rockford East High School basketball team. He loved acting in the school plays. His starring role was as Abraham Lincoln making an impressive presence on stage with his handsome countenance, sparkling blue eyes, bold voice, and six-foot four stature. His experiences on the stage and before an audience would transform and shape the rest of his life.

Following graduation in 1943, he enlisted in the US Navy. He trained at Camps Peary and Pendleton and served as Navy Seaman First class, 13th Special Construction Battalion attached to U.S. Marine Corps in the Pacific theater during WW II. Ted was very proud of his military service and would often sing or whistle, “Anchor’s Away” and “Marine’s Hymn”. It was not unusual to hear him greet a fellow veteran with a “Semper Fi”. His war experience would be the second transformational element in his life, creating an

underlying tenacity to question, probe, and challenge to discover meaning in life. After military service, he returned to Rockford, married his long-time friend, Dorothy Soderna. Ted and Dorothy would be married for sixty-six years.

Ted completed his undergraduate education at Northern Illinois State Teachers College in DeKalb, Illinois. He received his bachelors' degree in education with a concentration in Speech-Drama and Social Studies. He was on his way to become a teacher. Ted belonged to Alpha Psi Omega – Honorary Drama Fraternity; Alpha Phi Omega, National Service Fraternity; Kappa Delta Pi – National Education Society; served as President of Pi Kappa Delta – National Forensic Fraternity, and the Cavaliers – Honorary Scholastic Fraternity.

His love of the dramatic arts would blossom as he earned a M.A. degree and a Ph.D. in Speech and Dramatic Arts and Literature from the University of Iowa. From 1951 to 1955 he taught courses in Radio History, Radio Speech, Public Speaking, Theatre, and Forensics (debate) at Iowa State University. He also served as the Director of Children's Radio, Director of Experimental Radio and Theatre Productions, and a photographer for Visual Aid Production at Iowa State. While pursuing these studies, his son, Michael, was born in 1951 and daughter, Candice, in 1953.

In 1956, Ted joined the faculty of Western State College (now, Western State University) where he served as a Professor of Communication and Theatre for forty-five years. As a young faculty member, he directed many plays and coached the debate team. The Johnson family and a troupe of actors and debaters often camped and fished together in the Gunnison area. Around the campfire there was always intense debate and discussion.

Devoted to academic excellence, Ted taught over 42 different courses in English, literature, communications (public address, rhetoric, persuasion), theatre history, technical theatre (set design, lighting) radio history and the law, and radio speaking. While serving as Chairman for the Department of Arts and Humanities, he established the first interdisciplinary courses in classical Greek, Renaissance, and Medieval European subjects and the first Mass Media Laboratory and Photography program as well as an International Language Program in France, Austria, and Mexico. He was proud to lead the formation of the "Culture of the West Institute" and the non-professional summer theatre programs at Western State. His favorite course, "Symbols," was his pride and joy. Ted was fascinated with ancient Greece, it's history and philosophy. He studied the Greek language and during the late 1980's he traveled to Greece and attended the University of Colorado to pursue Classical studies.

Ted loved the Gunnison area and enjoyed camping, hunting, and fishing trips into the hills with his family. He enjoyed weightlifting and karate. He never went anywhere without a book, he never stopped learning or teaching. He was constantly reading and philosophizing about the “world of Ideas.” Ted could be a fearsome force, out-spoken and opinionated, argumentative and challenging to everyone. Even his family members often had to “make the case” and “provide the evidence” in order to change his opinion on a matter. But his confrontational character was part of a pursuit of truth and excellence. He was committed to clarity of thought and critical examination of ideas and issues.

Following retirement, Ted provided home care for his mother-in-law, and son, until their deaths. Ted was the main caregiver to his wife, Dorothy, and visited her every day at the Gunnison Valley Health Senior Care Center until her death. Later, Ted moved to Salt Lake City to be close to his daughter.

At high noon on a glorious sunny day, Ted closed his eyes and peacefully passed away. A life well lived.

Many thanks to the countless number of students who wrote letters to him over the years and confirmed that they were deeply influenced by him and passed along his legacy of great teaching to their own students. Through his teaching Ted has truly become immortal.

Many thanks to the staff of Brookdale Senior Living of Salt Lake City, Bristol Hospice and his doctor, Carole Baraldi, M.D., for their patient and devoted care.

No services are planned at this time. Please share memories and condolences at <http://www.serenityfhs.com>.

Comments



“ I remember registering for classes my first quarter at Western State. September 1970 .

At that time, professors sat at tables all around the gym and you actually registered in person with them! How quaint!

At the time, I was an English major and needed to register for a required course...Communication, I believe. The only professor without a long line in front of him was Dr Johnson, so I signed up with him.

Then I started hearing the stories of students fleeing in tears from his classroom and that he was the toughest professor on campus.

Which I took as a personal challenge.

I got an A in that class, switched my major to History, but still took his classes (History of the Theater, Rhetoric) as electives.

He was inspiring, challenging, brilliant, and made every class an exciting intellectual experience.

Kelly Paige, Lake Oswego, Oregon

Kelly Paige - April 28 at 10:28 AM



“ T. C. helped save more than few lives. I ran across him in my second year at Western State in 1993. I had spent the past year in a blind rage at the general decline of the educational system. I could not believe that my generation was in the process of making this college, and presumably all others, no different than the high schools they had been forced to leave behind. What Antonio Damasio now calls the "homeostatic imperative" (it seems tragic that I will never have the chance to discuss *The Strange Order of Things* with him - he would have liked that book). After all, I had dropped out of high school for a reason, and this intellectual bankruptcy was a big part of it. And then, I sort of stumbled into T.C.s public speaking course by chance. On day one, he made it very clear that this retrograde immaturity nonsense would NOT fly in his domain. I teared up and my heart pounded. I had waited all my life to find someone who would draw that line and actually mean it. That 50% drop rate was real - my class dwindled week by week, and they all knew why they left. He simply demanded six minutes of prepared speech, delivered extemporaneously, bare-handed (or bare knuckled if you had the guts). It was terrifying to confront how hard that can be (and yes, he busted me on my first speech for winging it). It was also thrilling, a kind of intellectual "Free Solo" that separated those of us who actually did the homework from those who just went through the motions. No notes, no ropes, and you had damn well better know your toeholds before you took the front of the room. He pushed, I learned, and most important, I came to know that at least one person would hold that standard no matter what. The next year, I took his Symbols class as an elective. I was the only one in the room to do so that semester- and the other students thought I was clearly insane for doing so. OK, so I spent the summer before that class reading the assigned texts (*Eliade*, *Cassirer*, et.al.). I asked what we would cover, and he told me (i.e., he did not think adequate preparation constituted some form of cheating, bless that obstinate heart). He became ill that semester, and missed some of the middle, but he was there for the start and the end. The former high school dropout managed to earn an A for that class. It will remain my biggest accomplishment as a college student - those essays for the Symbols Final may be some of my best high-pressure work.

I was lucky -- I had the chance to study with him for an entire year of my life, and his hand will shape my destiny in ways both large and small. I hope he may rest in peace.

As for those who tried to take him down, they should not breathe any easier with his passing (for his students, at least those who did not walk away before the end of the semester, are still here and we WILL carry that standard forward, no matter what).

-- Steven Peterson, Western State College, 1996



“ Last week I was told my boyfriend about TC's “Symbols” class, which I took in the mid-1980s, because it had a big impact on me. Today I saw the Western Colorado University alumni magazine and heard about his passing. TC was truly thoughtful, challenging, humorous, and in many ways I am a teacher today myself due to his influence. He will be missed.

Gwendolyn Rector

Gwendolyn Rector - June 27, 2019 at 11:06 PM



“ I just received the latest issue of The Westerner, and was heartbroken to see TC's name on the Memoriam page. Dr. Johnson was the toughest, most passionate, and inspiring instructor I have ever had the joy of knowing. He challenged, frightened and infuriated me, all at the same time each and every day while enrolled in his courses.

As a Speech/ Drama major who only wanted to take Drama classes, I had no idea what I was in for when I signed up for my first class with him, but I worked harder, worried more, and was prouder of my first 'A' from him than any grade before or since!

I guess I thought he was more than human and could possibly live forever, and after reading the story of his career and family, I see now that he was even more awesome than I thought and the Western world has lost a giant of a man. I will continue to think of him as larger than life and one of my heroes!

Condolences to his family, and may he be remembered an amazing educator and an intellectual, thoughtful human being!

Fredi (Hermann) Beck '72 - June 27, 2019 at 03:31 PM



“ My heartfelt condolences to Candace for the loss of the last member of your family. During the summer of 1971 and I got to talk to your Mom, Dad and Mike several times. I always wondered what kind of life you had and where you lived.

We were in Crested Butte this last weekend and picked up the paper and saw his obituary. What a great piece of writing! I assume you wrote it Candace, using skills you learned from your dad. I would enjoy hearing from you if you have any inclination; I can be reached at www.therohdefoundation.org.

I hope all is well with you and all my best!

John Rohde

John Rohde - May 11, 2019 at 04:55 PM



“ I was a student of TC's I'm the late 70s and early 80s. I was telling one of my kids about TC just about the time of his passing. There must have been a disturbance in ether that turned my thoughts to him.

Ted had a great mind and was an incredible educator. He was tough taskmaster with a big heart; he truly wanted us, and Western State to succeed. His respect was well earned and fairly and generously rewarded. He was one of a few professors who left an indelible impression on my life. These fine educators inspired me to follow them into academia.

After I started teaching at The Colorado College, Ted congratulated me and gave me advice, "You've landed on a higher rung for your first job! That's great! Always move up from there, never, never down." He was still mentoring after his official obligations ended. Then, although he never knew it, he kicked my butt one more time. I remember the essay tests he would give. He would start the test period by scratching on the acres of ancient slate boards in Taylor Hall with a lime chalk stick, "Identify, Define, and Relate to the plot of:" Then he would spend the rest of the team hour test period writing the title of a Greek play followed by three or four quotes, props, scenes, objects for each. It was the only class I had to take a second time because he would not accept a C from a major. Yeah, well I tried that test method... Once. It works really well is you have TC's photographic memory for grading it. I nearly died of sleep deprivation grading that thing on time! The whole time I was working on it I could hear him, "These people can't write a note to the milkman!"

He was relentless with his much needed drive for change and excellence in the department at Western. I was elected to the Student Body Senate as Arts and Humanities Representative on a ballot on which I didn't even vote! My first knowledge of my winning was when I got a phone call that I was late for a legislative session. My views were seen as being to "faculty oriented" and got little traction.

Prior the election, TC and I had many conversations about the need for change in certain areas of the campus. I've never been able to prove it but I highly suspect TC was behind my election to student government to be his influence in the organization.

Ted did struggle with the modern world and we lived him for it. The six line, rotary dial phone on his desk would have one line blinking on hold, one line in use, and third ringing. "Carol! The phone is ringing! What do I do?" He would call out to his secretary. Of course, we didn't help in this area. My un-icted co-conspirators and I found an article in 'Modern Librarian' magazine detailing how the new library security system worked using magnetic strips installed in the bindings of the books. Of course we found one, remove it from the book and installed it in TC's briefcase. For days the librarians would stop him when he set of the alarm when exiting the building. After never finding a book on him, they just ignored the buzzer as he passed through. I believe they just thought it was something about TC the alarm didn't like.

The world is a lesser place today without TC. We were so unknowingly fortunate as students to have him.

B. Hall BA, Theatre and a Communications, Western State, '81

Brett Hall - May 08, 2019 at 08:04 AM



“ Ted was truly unique among all the colleagues I worked with. I greatly missed him after leaving Western State. What made him unique is that somehow, after suffering 30 years of stagnant administration, he was elected chair by a political fluke of higher education mis-management, perhaps un-management, and then launched an aggressive campaign of renewal and advancement, and actually succeeded in many of his plans. Improvement in the theatre, actual theatre classes, remodel in Taylor Hall, photography classes, radio and tv programming, the multi-media studio, summer theatre, etc. He was the first person at Western to actually go into the computer center and watch student enrollment in courses and alter registration allotments in real time. He hired me because he had suffered with what he considered the mediocrity of DU graduates for years... No names here. Ted got the PhD from Iowa in the days when they had the best educational theatre program in the country and he saw in me similar training as most of my teachers at Indiana had also graduated from Iowa back in the day.

After arriving in Denver on a 747, which was late, I got to Gunnison on one of the prop Convair 580s, which looked like a real plane in the movies. Helen Hirst, elderly then and now long gone, picked me up at the airport and showed me Taylor Hall and the shop, which was head deep in crap. eventually I connected with Frank Venturo, and finally, Ted arrived from Denver in his beat-up green Datsun pickup. He had been doing post grad work in Greek stuff and was full of beans. I was dressed in a white double-breasted suit with flared pants. His truck had no floor space because it was full of dirty ranch stuff and rolling oil cans. He took me to dinner at the Cattleman's. I think he had switched vehicles for the old Willy's jeep. And, having just been elected chair he was in high gear. He was ready for school to start so he could kick butts. The next day he and Frank drove me to Crested Butte to sell me the job, after I got out of designer clothes. Had cookies and milk at the bakery. On the way back to Indiana, I was the only passenger on the plane from Gunnison to Aspen, where several swells got on and then everybody had to move because Henry Kissinger and his Secret Service guys got on. Now that's how to interview. It was great to be Ted's fair-haired boy and write manifestos and make new courses and I got to design the photo labs and the tv studio in addition to working with all the great students in theatre. After my first year there, the then Dean assumed I would become a director, and not do dirty work anymore, since previously hired tech directors had abdicated after their first years. I wasn't interested, and Ted also insisted I be paid to do summer work, which they had never done before. Ted liked to bend my ear and he could talk a blue streak; I heard a lot those first years about the Greek bi-cameral mind. ? I know he spent most of theatre history on the Greeks... He just didn't slow down as the years passed and got even more aggressive when Western started having enrollment problems. There was a real shit-storm with the English professors when Ted told them they could no longer teach 2 or 3 students in their pet courses like Milton, or Chaucer and that they would have to always have a full teaching load even if they had to teach Comm 1 and 2. Horrors! You guys should have been in the meeting after that. There were continuing attempts to thwart Ted's innovations, and they didn't like me much either, young smart ass, but Ted persevered, sometimes by thin voting margins. I hated meetings, and Ted often had to send someone to the shop to get me late in afternoon, so I could vote his way and throw decisions when there was trouble in

paradise.

Of all the things I'll miss about about Ted the most is the ability he had to talk long about whatever he was into at the time.

He'll be missed.

Van Tinkham

Professor of Theatre

Ogden, Utah

Van Tinkham - May 07, 2019 at 04:15 PM



“ My heart goes out to your family. TC will be sorely missed. I had him for Speech class in the early 1990s at Western State. I will never forget what he said to us the first day of class. There would be a 50% attrition rate by mid-terms, and he was okay with that. I was terrified. I was a non-traditional student and much older than my classmates. TC instilled in me the desire to do my very best, and I'm happy to say he pushed me to that goal. I learned so much from TC. When I became a speech teacher, I followed everything he taught me and shared it with my students. I will never forget him.

Margaret Buscovick Flesner - May 07, 2019 at 10:19 AM



“ Thoughts and prayers to you and your family. I had TC for a speech class during my years at WSC (believe it was around 94-95ish). The speech class was a requirement for being in the education program. He was the toughest teacher I ever had, but he taught me a lot about public speaking. When I opened my grades, he had put down an A which I couldn't believe. I talked to him later about it and he said it was because each time I spoke or took a test, I did better....I LEARNED. I think that was the most important lesson...to LEARN and not just memorize. He will be missed.

Rebecca Walker

WSC '96 Music Ed

Rebecca Mae Walker - May 02, 2019 at 03:27 PM



“ Kym O'Connell-Todd sent a virtual gift in memory of Theodore Clark Johnson



Kym O'Connell-Todd - May 02, 2019 at 08:41 AM



“ Kym O'Connell-Todd lit a candle in memory of Theodore Clark Johnson



Kym O'Connell-Todd - May 02, 2019 at 08:38 AM



“ RIP, Ted. You were the best (and the scariest) teacher I ever had, and one who influenced my life. You will never be forgotten.

Kym O'Connell-Todd - May 02, 2019 at 08:39 AM



“ I agree, Dr. Johnson was a tough teacher and I just loved him. I took several classes from him in the late 1960's including Senior Seminar. While my friends took the Easy A SS class I took Dr Johnson. Every class was so stimulating, I loved it when he challenged me and made me defend my position.

I was lucky, I ran into Dr Johnson here in Gunnison just a few years ago and got to thank him. From my four years at WSC I can perhaps name three or four professors. But I remember Dr. Johnson, what an impact he made on me.

Jay Hill
WSC Class of 1970

Jay Hill - May 03, 2019 at 12:13 PM



“ My father ('77) and myself ('02) both had TC as a professor. His courses were challenging and people would break down in tears during his questioning. I took four of his courses including Symbols. The guy was solid and I often think of him.

-Jack L. Houghtaling Class of 2002.

Jack Houghtaling - July 14, 2020 at 01:16 PM