

In Honor of My Father, Dr. Robert W. Johnson

I suppose I should be glad not to be well-practiced at writing memorial articles; to record the accomplishments of a life and say something about the essence of someone is no easy task. To do that for my father, someone who conveyed something larger than life, is all the more difficult.

Robert Walter Johnson was born on March 11th, 1930. He was the youngest of three children born to Swedish immigrants, Anna Anderson and George (Thure) Johnson. "Bobby" grew up making mischief in Bayside, Queens. He earned money as a teenager by trapping muskrats and selling the skins. After high school, his family moved to New Milford, Connecticut, where he worked on a dairy farm, for the postal service and as a house painter with his father.

In 1952, Robert Johnson was drafted into the army. During his service in the Korean War, he was a tank gunner, a tank commander, an operations sergeant and the first sergeant for Tank Company 179th Infantry Regiment, 45th Division. He was proud to have served his country.

After the war, he worked as a school bus driver and entered Hofstra in 1954 as an undergraduate, completing his BA in biology in 1958. From 1956 to 1957, he worked for the Nematode Research Laboratory, Plant Pest Control Division of The United States Department of Agriculture. He earned his MA in Biology in 1959 and was appointed as a biology instructor. He taught courses in zoology, botany, human biology, comparative anatomy and ornithology.

In 1962, Robert Johnson, was the only teacher from Long Island to be selected to receive the prestigious Danforth Foundation College Teacher's Grant for doctoral study. He chose to pursue a PHD program at Cornell University, completing his thesis in 1972 titled: "Ecology and Management of the Northern Clapper Rail, Rallus longirostris crepitans" and receiving his doctorate in Wildlife Management. He returned to Hofstra and became an associate professor of biology, teaching undergraduate and graduate courses in conservation, ecology, field ecology, evolution, limnology and tropical marine biology. He served as director of the Biology Department's field laboratory at Point Lookout, on various faculty committees and as an advisor to many students and student groups.

Dr. Johnson was one of the originators of The Long Island Environmental Council for Citizens for the Hempstead Plains, served as advisor to: The Nassau County Fish and Game Association, Nassau County Environmental Management Council, The Save Our Bay Association, and was scientific advisor to State Legislature, Albany, NY. He was Director of Nassau County Soil and Water Conservation District, consultant to Terrestrial Ecology for Grumman Ecosystem Corporation and was appointed Marine Conservation Biologist for the Town of Oyster Bay.

He established the environmental consulting firm, R.W. Johnson and Associates, and completed major impact statements across Long Island, New Jersey, Massachusetts and Connecticut. Some projects included: the Suffolk County South West Sewer District, vegetative maps for the United States Army Corps of Engineers covering parts of New Jersey's and Fire Island's Coasts, and classifying every tree in New York City's Riverside Park. He was a map-maker and an aerial photographer. The consulting work often involved a courtroom. Bob Johnson

would have been a great lawyer. Not only was he an expert in the field, but he had the language and moxie to back it up. This was true in discussions too: a man of strong opinions, but with the knowledge and confidence to support them.

Dr. Johnson also gave his time to The Nature Conservancy, conducted barrier beach trips, gave seminars to university and local civic groups on the nature and future of Long Island, was a member of The Wildlife Society, American Forestry Society, Audubon Society, Defense Orientation Conference Association (DOCA) and published many articles dealing with the effects of hurricane's on Long Beach, residential development of Fire Island, the Pine Barrens, and the necessity of conservation concern on world population growth. He also enjoyed writing editorials, poetry and short stories.

In 1987, Robert W. Johnson received the George M. Estabrook award for his service to Hofstra University. In 1988, he was again recognized for his continued efforts by his appointment as the first Donald E. Axinn Distinguished Professor of Ecology and Conservation. He chose to donate the award to establish a graduate scholarship fund which is still active today.

Dr. Johnson was committed to wildlife conservation, planting of seedlings of marsh grasses, trees, shrubs and vines for restoration and to prevent erosion. As the former "Johnny Appleseed" of Hofstra University, he planted over 4,800 seedling trees and vines around the main campus and faculty club. The black locust trees along Earl Ovington Boulevard still soar from Johnson seedlings. In 1992, Dr. Johnson established his own tree farm near Ithaca, New York, where, carefully planning the placement of ponds, trees and clearings, he successfully built his own 200-acre ecosystem.

Robert W. Johnson was indeed a Renaissance man: a builder, an architect, an inventor and a lover of military history, Nordic mythology, and his Swedish heritage. He was an avid hunter and fisherman. In his down time, Bob Johnson was a voracious reader. He was a creative person with an amazing wealth of ideas and projects always in process.

For those who were lucky enough to be graced by being in the inner circle of his life, we knew him as having created an immortal image of mountain strength. The most distinguishing characteristic of his personality was his generosity. He was someone you could count on, and many did; and in return he genuinely felt nourished by being able to help. He had the gift of making people feel comfortable and at ease.

Robert Johnson helped to build two strong, smart, willful and independent children; Kristin Elizabeth and Arn Thure are both teachers. He is also survived by his partner of over 20 years, Susan Van Horn. He has one grandson, Gunnar Robert Johnson, a daughter-in-law, Claire Meeker Johnson, his brother George, a niece Barbara Mitchell Kolenda, and a grand-niece Katherine Kolenda. His family also includes the Kaplans, the Van De Marks and the Chicago and Sweden contingent. He was very proud that all together the immediate Johnson Family holds 11 degrees from Hofstra University so far.

Our family is a Hofstra family through and through. Many childhood birthday parties ended with the highlight of visiting the former animal lab in Gittleson Hall. Dr. Johnson truly loved teaching and was deeply thankful to Hofstra for giving him the opportunity to do what he loved for 37 years. He was a teacher both personally and professionally; if you were in his presence, you were learning. In order to make the information more

accessible to his audience, he taught through story. His deep voice resonated such passion for what he was saying; he easily captivated listeners of all ages. Who would have known that the made up goodnight sagas to his children, would resurface in lessons about the food chain. He wanted us all to become more critical thinkers.

On September 28, 2002 Dr. Johnson died of complications from lung cancer. His traumatic death was no reflection on his life. We mourn his death and the fact that 72 years was not enough time for so many things. The Johnson family apologizes for the late notice and thank all in the Hofstra community who played a part in enriching Dr. Johnson's life.

Kristin Johnson