

## **A tribute to Ernie Johnson from Julie Stewart**

Everyone here today has Ernie stories. In the book "Five people you meet in Heaven", it says "no story sits by itself. Sometimes stories meet at the corners and sometimes they cover one another completely like stones beneath a river".

Ernie's stories can each have legendary proportions and rightfully so. He was a legend, a leader, creative and innovative, funny and mischievous, loyal and strong, a storyteller and a listener.

As his daughter Jennie said, things just kind of calmed down when Dad arrived. Ernie had a way of going that – you could send him anywhere and he could make things better.

Last year I sent him to Florida for the hurricanes. There were no flights into Florida so he drove in from Georgia. It was in the midst of a massive evacuation and every living person was leaving Florida. And here was Ernie – all by himself heading down a 4 lane highway – no cars in front – no cars behind. He said it was kind of strange when he looked at all the tail lights leaving Florida. But that was Ernie – straight into the heart where people needed him.

This was the only man I know who said "Yee Gads". This was the only man on earth who told off Steven Spielberg. Hunting stories from Curlew – fishing stories – Alaska stories – the Being struck by Lightning story – the childhood stories. I think he set his Mom's closet on fire melting his green plastic soldiers.

Ernie was a leader. It doesn't surprise me to know that he was ASB President in middle school. This was our future Incident Commander. I saw childhood pictures of Ernie outdoors – in trees and those mischievous school pictures.

He would get that twinkle in his eyes and you would think "Oh No! What's he up to?". There's the skate story at Ft Worden now taking on Moby Dick proportions. And the time he was in a fire training scenario with role players and trainees. Somehow a shepherd and sheep was introduced into the fire and in a blink of an eye, Ernie calmly announced on the radio that the team needed to "get the flock out of there".

We worked hard and played hard. Our fire meetings at Ft. Worden each year were legendary and not just for the poker games. Here it is in the middle of the night and we hear "thump, thump, thump" coming down the old wooden stairs. Here comes Ernie and Mike Monahan armed with fire extinguishers and you can only imagine the mayhem that came next.

There are the invention stories – the hovercraft for his kids. Ernie convinced the local police responding to a UFO complaint that the hovercraft was really his lawnmower. The helitorch stories, the racing stories and the family stories.

It's not easy being a fire family. There is much sacrifice. The Johnson family understood and went through all the fire assignments with Ernie and it couldn't have been easy.

While it is inconceivable and inconsolable that he passed away on a fire assignment. It is also pure Ernie. For just imagine what a horrible hospital patient he would have been. Though he probably would have MacGyver'd his hospital bed and organized races.

Ernie was a great counselor and mentor and it shows today in our Forest Service and fire management leadership. And in your darkest hour – with just a few words he could patch things together. Ernie's wisdom was like duct tape – useful everywhere.

When I left the Olympic, my job had been abolished. Bruised and battered, my self worth shattered, Ernie's wisdom helped me pick up the pieces. He was the emcee at my going away party. Ernie explained that the current FS philosophy that the loss of personnel was akin to taking your hand out of a bucket of water resulted in no change. He said that this was BS and that there was always a loss when a person left and that all of us leaving the Olympic had made a difference to the community and to the Forest Service.

This has since become my personal philosophy. That one person can make a difference. Ernie was one who truly made a difference – in so many circles with so many lives. And he will continue to make a difference: through his inventions, through his racing, through his family, through his friendships and through his stories for this is his legacy.

And he faced the future with a joy of life. He was a great Airspace Coordinator. He was building an airplane in his back yard. He was teaching his grandson about airplanes. There were always new projects lined up.

And so we have a loss today. For we have lost a friend and a storyteller who made in difference in all he did with all he met. Our friend for all time. And for those who could not be here today – those in your fire family and your airspace family – they send their highest respects.

And in the closing words of "Five People You Meet in Heaven" it is said "that each person affects the other and the other affects the next. And the world is full of stories, and the stories are all one". So keep telling the stories and remember our friend Ernie.