

Named Endowed Funds

The Kenny Johnson and the Johnson Company Memorial Fund



Kenneth "Kenny" Perry Johnson was known to be a gentleman's gentleman who valued hard work, diligence and perseverance. He was an integral part of the Cloquet community and a strong supporter of education.

Kenny was born February 4, 1918 in Lake Hanska, Minnesota. He died December 14, 1988 in Scottsdale, Arizona. He served in World War II in a medics unit that was part of the Normandy Beach invasion. After the war he returned to his job selling shoes in a department store in Willmar, Minnesota. Kenny, who believed if you can sell shoes you can sell anything, decided to move his family to Cloquet in 1947 to manage Roy Harnish's Federated Store. Kenny worked there for five years before buying the Federated Store with Kenneth and Eleanor Johnson (no relation). They named their business the Johnson Company.

The Johnson Company went on to purchase the Stewart Furniture building and the Treasure Shop. In 1972 Kenny bought out his partners becoming the sole owner of the Johnson Company. Over the years it grew from having four employees to over 30. Many in the Cloquet community have fond memories of Kenny and what the Johnson Company meant to the area.

Lisbeth Moller Kent '60 remembered: "He made shopping for shoes, and so much else, fun. From those first trips with our mothers to Johnson Company to that occasional step onto the 'magical' shoe-size machine and then to after-school visits to the store in teen years, our encounters with Kenny Johnson were happy occasions

Kenny was well known for his love of golf. Joe Harmala '61 told this story: "During the summer I noticed Mr. J. was absent quite regularly on Thursday afternoons. I was told 'he's at the dentist.' The next summer after returning from St Cloud State, it was the same thing. So, I bravely asked him, 'How are your teeth?' He looked puzzled and said, 'Why do you ask?' I explained how I noticed that he was gone on Thursday afternoons. He said, 'Come into my office' and proceeded to tell me that Thursday afternoon was men's golf league at the Country Club and then asked me to keep it under my hat."

Dave Rosen '70 remembered Kenny's love for golf. "My brothers, Michael (Beatsie) '74, Tim '77 and I caddied for him for years," he said. "Mr. J. would heckle his golfing buddies and joke with them—he really made me laugh. They played for a quarter a hole. If Mr. J. was losing, he would convince his buddies to play four more holes so he could win his money back – and he usually did!"

Tim Rosen reminisced about the times he spent with Kenny. “I was Mr. Johnson’s steady caddie for at least four years, and then worked at the Johnson Company for four to five years. He was a gentleman’s gentleman through and through. I learned a lot about right from wrong through the years while working by his side. Hard work, diligence and perseverance come to mind as characteristics of his lifestyle and personal traits.”

Kenny also had a strong commitment to the community and served on many social and community organizations including: Cloquet School Board, Community Memorial Hospital Board, Northwest Paper Company Foundation, and Aspen Arms Housing Authority. He also served as president of the Chamber of Commerce, the Cloquet Golf Club, the Rotary Club, and as chairman of the United Fund. Kenny was also actively involved with Our Savior’s Lutheran Church and was a Boy Scout leader for seven years.

Tim Rosen remembers Kenny’s strong support of Cloquet and its schools. “He always looked for ways to improve the quality of life, providing job opportunities and showing a strong interest in making sure we had a quality educational system in town,” he said. “He was a wonderful man who always looked for the best in others and gave us the best he had. He was an inspiration, not only to the legion of caddies at the Cloquet Country Club, but to kids throughout the city and surrounding communities.”

Born and raised by farmers in southwest Minnesota, Kenny left school after completing the eighth grade to help with the farm, but always regretted not having received a high school diploma. He loved reading history books and even considered becoming a history teacher at one time. Because he valued education so highly, he sent all three of his daughters to college and was extremely supportive of the high school and college students who worked for him.

Harmala, shared, “His willingness and openness regarding the Johnson Company while researching and writing my master’s thesis enabled me to acquire sales and marketing concepts that I would share with my students; it was invaluable.”

Dave Jenkins ‘60 concurred. “He was my salvation as far as getting a college degree. He supported me every step of the way,” he said.

Kenny’s support for students receiving a quality education will live on in perpetuity through the work of the CEF. On February 4, 2018, the 100th anniversary of Kenny’s birth and closely following the 30th anniversary of his death, his eldest daughter, Cynthia Johnson ‘60, decided to establish an endowed fund to honor her father’s memory.