



Howard Hesseman as Dr. Johnny Fever in the "WKRP" studio on a Los Angeles soundstage made to look authentic with a Cincinnati map on the wall. ENQUIRER FILE

Silverton High grad, famed actor Howard Hesseman dies at 81

Bill Poehler
USA TODAY NETWORK

Butch Main once admitted he was not the most studious member of Silverton High School's 1958 graduating class. But he would go on to become the most famous.

The stepson of Silverton police chief Rell R. (Buck) Main, Butch saw himself as a rebel and a poor student, though he was editor of the student newspaper, secretary of the hot rod club "The Shifters" and acted in a half dozen plays.

It wasn't until 1971, after launching his entertainment career, that he would reclaim his birth name of Howard Hesseman and become one of the most beloved television actors of his generation.

Hesseman died Saturday at age 81.

"He was just loveable," said Simone Stewart, an actress and community engagement manager for Silverton.

His manager Robbie Kass confirmed Sunday to USA TODAY that Hesseman died Saturday in Los Angeles from complications of colon surgery, calling him a "ground-breaking talent" and lifelong friend "whose kindness and generosity was equaled by his influence and admiration to generations of actors and improvisational comedy throughout the world."

An Oregon native

Hesseman was born in Lebanon. When he was 7, his mother, Edna, married Salem Police officer Buck Main and he moved to Salem. Hesseman went by the names Butch Main and Howard Main for most of his childhood.

Buck Main was an officer in the Salem Police Department from 1938 to 1952, and Hesseman attended schools in Salem until the seventh grade. In 1951, Buck Main was hired as chief of the four-person Silverton Police Department and the family moved to Silverton.

"In the schoolyard and on the playgrounds, only the children of school administrators and children of ministers ranked below the police chief's kid," Hesseman told the Calgary Herald in 1986.

Hesseman frequently said he did not get along with his stepfather.

"I've only begun to un-

cover the depths of my suffering," he told the Chicago Tribune in 1986. "We never got along real well. He was the focal point of my rebellion because, by the nature of his work, he was authority personified."

A Mid-Valley education

Though he wasn't a stellar student, Hesseman credited some of his Silverton High School teachers with inspiring him.

He based Charlie Moore – the teacher character he played on the sitcom Head of the Class – on his senior year history teacher at Silverton, Ron Hite.

Hesseman told a story about how Silverton's principal, "who was basically a fascist," would frequently interrupt classes over the new public address system.

Hite would play the recorder each time until the principal stopped talking, finish the song, put the recorder away and continue to teach class.

"He made it fun to learn," Hesseman told the Sioux City (Iowa) in 1986. "He didn't overlay everything with a mantle of deadly seriousness. He himself was accessible as a human being. He wasn't just there to regurgitate facts to his students."

Hesseman said he tested at an 11th grade reading level in the fifth or sixth grade, but despised math and science. Still, he graduated from Silverton in 1958 and attended University of Oregon for two years, originally majoring in journalism.

He even managed to get through the mandatory ROTC program "with straight D's."

"I would spend my exam time answering each question as briefly and correctly as possible," he said. "Then I would use the rest of the test period to write as thorough an essay as possible concerning my feelings about mandatory ROTC and the armed forces as a means of expressing foreign policy."

Hesseman worked with some of Oregon's drama groups and after telling professor Dr. Preston Tuttle that he wanted to act professionally was advised to leave school.

"His advice to me was that if I was serious about

an acting career, I should leave the university environment immediately and pursue acting," Hesseman told the Calgary Herald. "He felt that all I would learn at the university is how to teach acting to other people who would wind up teaching others."

Finding fame

Hesseman moved to San Francisco and launched his career in the entertainment industry, first as Buck Main and then as Don Sturdy.

Hesseman started out as a member of the improv group The Committee and at the time he moonlighted on Saturdays as a DJ for San Francisco rock 'n' roll station KMPX.

He worked as a DJ in the 1960s, something he would use in his most iconic role, as disc jockey Dr. Johnny Fever on "WKRP in Cincinnati."

Hesseman frequently ad-libbed Fever's on-air banter, and became a counterculture icon for the role at a time when few hippie characters made it onto network television.

As Fever, he spun now-classic rock songs such as Boston's "Don't Look Back," Toto's "Hold the Line" and Blondie's "Heart of Glass," many of which owed a debt to "WKRP" for growing their audience.

"I think maybe Johnny smokes a little marijuana, drinks beer and wine, and maybe a little hard liquor," Hesseman told The New York Times in 1979 as he readied for one of three "Saturday Night Live" hosting gigs. "And on one of those hard mornings at the station, he might take what for many years was referred to as a diet pill. But he is a moderate user of soft drugs, specifically marijuana."

Hesseman launched his acting career with a guest role on "The Andy Griffith Show" in 1968 and went on to become a go-to character actor for both TV and film, with his many memorable turns including appearances on "The Bob Newhart Show" and "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman" and film roles in "Shampoo," "The Other Side of Midnight" and "This Is Spinal Tap." He was also seen on the syndicated reboot "The New WKRP in Cin-

cinnati" from 1991 to 1993. "Laverne & Shirley" actor and comedian Michael McKean, who starred with Hesseman in "Spinal Tap," hailed the actor's bona fides on Twitter.

"Impossible to overstate Howard Hesseman's influence on his and subsequent generations of improvisors," he wrote.

He recalled first seeing Hesseman in 1971 with The Committee. "I saw that he was the real deal."

Original "Saturday Night Live" cast member Laraine Newman mourned him as a close friend.

"RIP Howard Hesseman. What great times we had," she tweeted. "Great laughs and fun going to see Etta James in Manhattan Beach and Joe Tex at The Parisian Room. Staying at your beautiful house in Ramatuelle. Oh god this hurts."

The actor scored two Emmy nominations as best supporting actor in a comedy for his role on WKRP, which ran from 1978 to 1982. He also

played architect Sam Royer, Ann Romano's second husband and Barbara's father-in-law, on "One Day at a Time," and went on to star in "Head of the Class" as history and social studies teacher Charlie Moore in the 80s.

Hesseman wasn't so disconnected from some of the characters he played.

In 1983, he told People

that he had conducted "pharmaceutical experiments in recreational chemistry." He was once jailed in San Francisco for selling marijuana in the 60s.

Hesseman is survived by his wife, Caroline Ducrocq, an actress and acting coach.

Contributing: Kim Willis, USA TODAY, and Jake Coyle, The Associated Press

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Obituaries

Ronald Dale Averette

CANBY - Ronald Averette was born on February 22, 1936 in Nyssa, Oregon.

He passed away peacefully while surrounded by loved ones on January 31, 2022.

Ron enlisted in the Army for two years when he turned 19. Ron and Linda were married for sixty-one years. Ron is survived by his wife Linda, his daughter Debbie Blau, his sons Dan and Ron Averette, his sister Gladys Tite, and brother Beauford Averette, and had four grandchildren.

He is preceded in death by his parents Hugh and Mabel, along with his sisters Evelyn Fanshier,

Margaret Robbins, and brothers Fred, Donald, and Hubert Averette.

Ron will be missed by all.

Luella Mae Thomas

SCOTTS MILLS - Luella Mae Thomas passed away Friday January 28th, 2022 at Silverton Hospital After battling Pneumonia.

Luella was born July 8th, 1939 in Pomeroy, Washington to Raymond and Dorothy Williams. She married David Lee Thomas April 9th, 1955.

They had seven children together. Through many ups and downs Luella always remained the center of our family, our heart, and our rock.

Our hearts are breaking as Heaven welcomes her home.

She is preceded in death by her son David Dean, sister Mary Lee, and parents Raymond and Dorothy, brother Ray, husband David, daughter Dianna, and grandsons Chucky, and Michael.

Luella will forever be remembered by those she leaves behind; sisters Gend and Katie; brothers Eddie, and Glen; children, Louanna (Nic) Oliver, Robert (Laura), Donald, Jon, Ken, Christina, and her son – in-law Terry Jackson; grandchildren, Tony, Michael, Jessica, Tiffany, Robert, David, K.C., Phillip, Sarah, Justin, Josh, Brandon, Kenny, and Stephanie, with many many great-grandchildren Services to be held at the Holy Rosary Catholic Church, 7442 Crooked Finger Rd NE

Scotts Mills, Oregon at 11 am Friday, February 11th, 2022.

