

Astoria mourns former city official

Snyder's passions were finance, music

By **PATRICK WEBB**
For *The Daily Astorian*

Friends will gather Sunday to celebrate the life of John Snyder, the long-serving Astoria finance expert and enthusiastic member of the North Coast music scene.

Snyder died Sept. 18 after having undergone a heart operation, come home, then succumbed after appearing to be in recovery.

At 77, he was still working for the city as a financial analyst, looking ahead to a December retirement.

He and Paul Benoit, a longtime Astoria city executive now based in California, worked together for almost 27 years.

"When John was focused on something, or had his mind made up, there was no stopping him," Benoit recalled. "People might see his age and think, 'Wow, he was still working for the city at 77!'"

"When we first started working together, he told me that he would work until he was 76. As a 32-year-old, that was hard for me to fathom. But I knew he meant it — and I knew he'd stick to his plan."

Snyder was born in 1941 in Fort Wayne, Indiana, to parents Joseph and Catherine Snyder.

After his early schooling, he earned a master's degree in philosophy from Marywood College, a Catholic liberal arts university in Scranton, Pennsylvania, studying and teaching there from 1967 to 1974.

That passion for philosophy featured throughout his life. In



Patrick Webb/For The Daily Astorian

John Snyder, pictured rehearsing for the Pete Seeger tribute concert in April, worked behind the scenes as a financial analyst for Astoria, but in the local music scene he was out front as a singer and guitarist.

a tribute planned for Sunday, his widow, Janie Snyder, and family members will describe how he enjoyed embracing new concepts and studying spiritual teachers.

He gifted crystals to friends and family as a "manifestation of light" and shared T-shirts, magnets and bookmarks that featured inspirational sayings.

Always keen to break out of his comfort zone, Janie Snyder said her husband took dance lessons, tried kayaking and even climbed up on a zip line with his grandchildren about three years ago.

Dedicated to family

Snyder had come West with his first wife, Jane Garvin Reese, whose McGowan family were pioneers in Chinook, Washington. They had two children — Sarah, who lives in

Chicago and is mother of two of his grown grandchildren, and Matthew, who died in a surfing accident off Fort Stevens in 1994.

Snyder gained his accounting credentials through Portland State University and first worked at a downtown Astoria CPA office. He joined the city in 1985 when Edith Henningsgaard was mayor and served the entire span of the Willis Van Dusen era.

He met his second wife, then Janie Ann Olds, in circumstances that still make her chuckle 30 years later. "I was working as a secretary for a computer consulting company on 10th Street and he came in to check about some inventory software for the city!" she laughed.

She already had three daughters, Sheri, Stephanie

and Laurie, and there are now six grandchildren. Close family members include Donovan Duchene, father of their 12-year-old granddaughter, Mathena, whom the Snyders have helped raise.

Janie Snyder said her husband put family first. "He always said, 'I have enough love for all of you.'"

Not really retired

Snyder worked as city finance director with several prior top executives, including Jim Flint, Benoit and Dan Bartlett. He "retired" as finance director in 2011, but continued working with the city as a financial analyst.

Benoit's career with the city began as community development director in 1986, and he returned as city manager many years later.

JOHN SNYDER

A celebration of life will be held from 3 to 5 p.m. Sunday at the Elks Lodge, 453 11th St.

"John was a unique individual — extremely dedicated and hardworking, someone who would do anything for a friend, a spiritual guy who read stacks of books on religion and religious history, someone who had all the attributes of a Boy Scout," Benoit said.

City Hall staff recall decades of Christmas parties where Snyder would provide the music and everyone was expected to participate.

"John would show up with his guitar, a ream of handouts with all his favorite Christmas songs, and he would gather everyone together to sing with him," Benoit said. "I hated singalongs and told him so. He just smiled and added an extra song or two, just for my benefit. That was his way."

Music his passion

Performing folk music was his passion. When Unitarian minister Kit Ketcham recruited the North Coast folk crowd for an ambitious Pete Seeger 99th birthday party in April, Snyder stepped up.

Interviewed for a story promoting the concert, Snyder shared considerable admiration for the role of Seeger in modern American culture. "His vision, his connectivity with nature and the community was precious — and there's some incredible music, too," he said.

Snyder was recommended to participate by Mayor Arline LaMear, and Ketcham realized that he would be a perfect accompanist for Tom and Siv

Barnum of Astoria and Long Beach Peninsula music talent Sandy Nielson.

"This is a guy I didn't even know," Ketcham said. "He was quiet about it. It wasn't like he was overly bubbly. He was just enthusiastic in a quiet and competent way."

When organizers narrowed the list of songs, Snyder told her he wanted to sing his favorite "Guantanamera," the poignant Cuban song made famous by Seeger. Ketcham had hoped she would perform that classic, but Snyder's enthusiasm triumphed.

"This guy has been so helpful," she recalled her thought processes. "'OK, John, you can sing whatever you want.'" The song features difficult lyrics in Spanish with some English translations. "He threw himself into it and worked to get the pronunciation right," she said.

After the success of the concert, Ketcham asked performers to pitch in \$20 to cover the cost of souvenir CDs. "John pledged \$100 and told me, 'I just want to make sure everyone who wants a copy can have a copy.'"

At the invitation of Snyder's family, Ketcham and others will perform "Guantanamera" at Sunday's celebration of life.

Janie Snyder will participate in an unorthodox tribute highlighting Snyder's favorite sayings, including, "If one is good, more is better" and the French declaration, "No remorse! No regret!"

One that the family especially savors is, "Have a tiny rearview mirror and a huge windshield."

Katie Frankowicz of The Daily Astorian contributed to this report.

Washington state ends 'racially biased' death penalty

Execution was already rare

By **RACHEL LA CORTE**
and **GENE JOHNSON**
Associated Press

OLYMPIA, Wash. — Washington's Supreme Court unanimously struck down the state's death penalty Thursday as arbitrary and racially biased, making it the 20th state to do away with capital punishment.

Execution was already extremely rare in Washington, with five prisoners put to death in recent decades and a governor-imposed moratorium blocking its use since 2014.

But the court's opinion eliminated it entirely, converted the sentences for the state's eight death row inmates to life in

prison without release, and furthered a trend away from capital punishment in the U.S.

"The death penalty is becoming increasingly geographically isolated," said Robert Dunham, executive director of the Washington, D.C.-based Death Penalty Information Center. "It's still on the books in 30 states, but it's not being used in 30 states. It's becoming a creature of the Deep South and the Southwest."

Texas continues to execute more prisoners than any other state — 108 since 2010. Florida has executed 28, Georgia 26 and Oklahoma 21 in that timeframe. But nationally, death sentences are down 85 percent since the 1990s, Dunham said.

In the past 15 years, seven states — Connecticut, Delaware, Illinois, Maryland, New

Jersey, New Mexico and New York — have abandoned capital punishment through court order or legislative act, and three — Colorado, Oregon and Pennsylvania — have adopted moratoriums.

In New Hampshire and Nebraska, lawmakers banned the death penalty but saw those decisions overturned by veto or referendum.

The concerns cited in those states have ranged from procedural matters, such as the information provided to sentencing jurors in New York, to worries about executing an inno-

cent person or racial and other disparities in who is sentenced to death, as was the case in Washington.

"The death penalty is unequally applied — sometimes by where the crime took place, or the county of residence, or the available budgetary resources at any given point in time, or the race of the defendant," Chief Justice Mary Fairhurst wrote in the lead opinion.

She added: "Our capital punishment law lacks 'fundamental fairness.'"

Defense lawyers had long challenged the death penalty

on those grounds, noting the state's worst mass murderers and serial killers, Green River killer Gary Ridgway among them, had received life terms, not death. In a 5-4 ruling in 2006, the justices rejected an argument from a death row inmate that he shouldn't be executed because Ridgway hadn't been executed.

This time, death penalty

critics were armed with more data about how capital punishment works, including a statistical analysis by University of Washington sociologists. Their report showed that although prosecutors were not more likely to seek the execution of black defendants, juries were about four times more likely to sentence black defendants to death.

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