

Bob Jenson: May 11, 1931 - Jan. 6, 2018

# Elder statesman leaves lasting mark

Lawmaker won races as Democrat, Independent and Republican

By **KATHY ANEY**  
STAFF WRITER

The Dean of the House has died.

Bob Jenson, who died Saturday at age 86, served 18 years and nine terms in the Oregon House of Representatives until he retired in 2015. The Pendleton legislator, who also covered half of Hermiston for much of his time in the House, started his first term in 1997 and served so long his colleagues dubbed him “the Dean of the House.”

“He was unique in that he ran as a Democrat, as an Independent and as a Republican,” said former state Sen. David Nelson. “He won every time.”

Jenson’s wife, Evelyn, remembers her husband wrestling with the idea of changing his political affiliation.

“He was a Democrat at heart, but he recognized that it wasn’t a good fit with his district,” Evelyn said. “He tried to be an Independent, but that leaves you bereft of any influence.”

He did, however, get a kick out of being “a caucus of one.” Neither of the parties completely fit Bob, she said — fiscally, he was more conservative and socially, he leaned left. He seemed unfettered by party lines.

Evelyn still hasn’t wrapped her head around the idea that her beloved husband of 46 years is gone. The normally clearheaded



STAFF PHOTO BY KATHY ANEY

Former Rep. Bob Jenson stands in the House of Representative chambers in Salem shortly before retiring after nine terms in the Oregon House of Representatives.

Evelyn says she’s feeling fuzzy and disoriented as she grapples with the loss. Their large close-knit family is unmoored. Even the dog, a Chesapeake Bay Retriever who spent recent weeks camped out at Bob’s bedside, wanders around the house looking confused and unsettled.

“She’s been inconsolable,” Evelyn said.

Their family — four children, 11 grandchildren and 13 great-grandchildren — flowed in and out of Jenson’s Pendleton home on his last day. His death ended an on-and-off struggle with cancer that lasted five years.

His time in the Oregon Legislature came later in life. Jenson, who grew up on a Montana ranch and served in the U.S. Air Force, taught sociology and history for 26 years at Blue Mountain Community College.

Bob and Evelyn met at a teachers’ training in Colorado and fell in love. Evelyn,

who also taught at a community college at the time, decided to change to social work when they got married, thinking it would be a bad idea to work together at the college.

She laughs about that now. When Jenson first arrived in Salem in 1997, Evelyn came along to manage his office and serve as her husband’s first line of communication for lobbyists and constituents. The capitol was Bob’s natural habitat, she said, and he had all the right qualities to succeed.

“He was bright and deliberate and caring,” she said. “He tried very hard to be fair to all sides and he always tried to listen.”

State Sen. Bill Hansell, R-Athena, agrees with that. As a Umatilla County commissioner, Hansell worked with Jenson for many years before joining him in the Legislature in 2013. He called Jenson a close personal friend and a man of

integrity.

“First and foremost he voted for what he thought was best,” Hansell said, citing Jenson’s support for local education, agriculture and other regional issues. “His heart was in Eastern Oregon.”

A centrist who didn’t always toe the partisan line, sometimes his non-conformity got the lawmaker in hot water with his own party. In 2010, some predicted Jenson’s political demise after he voted with Democrats to put two budget-balancing tax hikes on the ballot (Measures 66 and 67). Ultimately, he kept his seat.

He continued to pick his battles carefully, focusing on such issues as water, education, mental health and, near the end of his career, wolves. He got a reputation for being crusty and courageous.

In 2009, Jenson got some press after he, the elder statesman, worked to find a solution for water issues with Jefferson Smith,



STAFF PHOTO BY E.J. HARRIS

Rep. Bob Jenson sits on the Ways and Means committee Tuesday, Feb. 5, 2013, in the state capitol in Salem.

a young, green Democrat from Portland. They became “the Odd Couple,” a two-member subcommittee on water resources who put together a water bill that brought irrigation dollars to Jenson’s district.

On Monday, comments flowed from Salem and beyond about Jenson’s legacy.

Gov. Kate Brown tweeted, “Bob Jenson was a dedicated public servant and beloved by many here in Oregon. He will be missed! Sending our thoughts and prayers to his family and loved ones.”

Rep. Greg Barreto, who won the seat after Jenson’s retirement, offered condolences to Jenson’s family and thanks for helping during his first term as a representative. “For years, Bob stood as a pillar of our district. He gave so much to our friends and neighbors over the years, and will be remembered fondly by many,” he wrote.

House Republican Leader Mike McLane called him “a true illustration of what it means to be a servant leader.”

Rep. Greg Walden wrote, “Bob Jenson served Eastern

Oregon thoughtfully, effectively and with great civility. I valued his friendship and his counsel over the years as we worked together on federal and state issues.”

Pendleton Mayor John Turner, former president of Blue Mountain Community College, called Jenson a mentor and champion of community colleges who made sure community colleges got their fair share of state funding.

Jenson, a master card player, moved his role as strategist to the bridge table after retirement. He focused on his family, his annual Alaskan fishing vacation and trips to the family cabin near Lostine. This year, he served as chairman of the local Gideons International chapter and president of the Peace Lutheran Church council.

Just before he retired, Jenson did a little self-assessment about his time in Salem.

“Like everyone who comes down here, I probably had visions of grandeur,” he said. “I think I’ve made a little difference.”

*Daniel Wattenburger contributed to this story.*

## BMCC nursing and dental students pass en masse

HERMISTON HERALD

The high fives are flowing at Blue Mountain Community College.

Each and every student in BMCC’s Class of 2017 Nursing and Dental Assisting programs passed his or her board examinations on the first try, giving BMCC a 100 percent pass rate in both programs.

All 19 nursing students who graduated in June from the program, passed the National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX),

a standardized exam that every state board of nursing uses to determine whether or not a nursing program graduate is prepared for nursing practice.

Graduates must pass the NCLEX to earn a registered nurse license.

All 19 graduates passed on the first attempt. Only three of Oregon’s 16 community college nursing programs had a 100 percent pass rate for 2017.

In addition, all nine BMCC dental assisting graduates passed their

national board exams. In Oregon, dental assistants are not licensed, but must be certified in order to take x-rays or to perform certain expanded functions.

BMCC Dental Assisting graduates have the ability to become certified dental assistants through the Dental Assistant National Board (DANB) by taking three national examinations and one Oregon examination. Employers prefer job candidates with a DANB certification, so those who pass have an edge over other

potential candidates.

BMCC’s Nursing program is a member of the Oregon Consortium for Nursing Education, a shared curriculum with Oregon Health and Science University.

BMCC students are co-enrolled with OHSU and offered the same classes at a much lower tuition rate. BMCC graduates can begin working as a nurse immediately, and if desired, may complete one additional year of study online to earn a bachelor of science in Nursing from OHSU.



PHOTO CONTRIBUTED BY CASEY WHITE-ZOLLMAN

Janet Lomas, a recent graduate of the dental assisting program at Blue Mountain Community College, is currently working for Dr. Ryan Wieseler at Desert Dental in Hermiston.

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