

# Larson: A mayor who time, and Seaside, won't forget

By Nancy McCarthy  
For EO Media Group

Seaside never really needed a chamber of commerce. All the city needed was Don Larson.

Mayor Larson, 80, died Dec. 11 following a long battle with cancer. But even that struggle didn't damper his enthusiasm for the town he loved.

No matter how he was feeling, no matter what personal or public issues he was dealing with, Don always greeted everyone with a broad smile and bright blue eyes that enveloped the person whose hand he was shaking.

And there was that laugh. A delighted, raspy laugh that traveled through a room packed with business operators and Seaside's movers and shakers at Friday morning breakfast gatherings. Anyone who knew Don knew that laugh.

His chuckles could be heard before City Council meetings when he joked with City Manager Mark Winstanley and personally greeted residents and fellow councilors. Then he would bang the gavel to signal that it was time to recite the salute to the American flag and begin the meeting. It was a ritual he performed as mayor for 14 years.

Don was a man of humor — he could make quick quips that eased tense discussions — and he was a man of compassion who encouraged nervous or emotional citizens, alone behind the lectern, to speak from their hearts.

### Accomplishments

A volunteer on city committees since 1994, he took pride in the accomplishments that a small town like Seaside had accomplished. We all heard him boast continually about how residents and city officials pulled together to achieve the new library, the skatepark, Broadway Park remodel, the popular Fourth of July celebrations and even the city's transportation system plan, among dozens of other projects.

Although he was mayor and the city's leader, Don sought little recognition. His praise went to local students, police officers, public works officials, library staff members, the visitors bureau, Seaside Civic and Convention Center employees, the Seaside Rotary and pretty much everyone who had anything to do with making Seaside shine. But it was Don who was named Mayor of the Year by the League of Oregon Cities in 2009.

Winstanley recently called him a "marvelous mayor."

"The city of Seaside couldn't have been luckier to have him and it's certainly a great loss.," Winstanley said after Don's death.

### Could be critical

Despite his nearly Pollyannish attitude toward Seaside, however — or maybe because of it — Don could be critical of those who he thought should be paying more attention to promoting the city. The



Seaside Mayor Don Larson, right, along with his wife, Lois, second from right, shares a laugh with Seaside Fire Chief Joey Daniels and girlfriend Jaime Oxley, a firefighter with the Gearhart Fire Department, about Oxley's oversized "Chief Daniels" inscribed jacket during the 2013 National Night Out celebration at Broadway Park.

### IMPRESSIONS

NANCY MCCARTHY



Daily Astorian and the Seaside Signal often received his scrutiny, especially if he thought Seaside wasn't receiving its proper share of headlines.

I remember attending a meeting where Don was presiding. Although the meeting topic had nothing to do with the Daily Astorian's local coverage, the mayor embarked on a mildly rambling tirade about the lack of attention the newspaper had been paying to Seaside lately. I had heard some of those views from him before, only in private.

Well, as the South County reporter for the paper, I felt called to action by his comments, even though they weren't directed specifically at me. I spent the next full day going through each paper for the previous month and writing down all Seaside-related headlines, including sports. I mailed the long list of headlines and story summaries to Don, along with a tersely worded letter pointing out that the paper wasn't meant to be the city's public relations organ, and mailed the packet to him.

The next day, as soon as his mail was delivered, he called me.

"Nancy," he said, a bit taken aback. "It sounds like you're mad at me."

He then apologized and mentioned that he had been out of town for most of the past month.

The incident was forgotten, and Don continued to be sincerely friendly.

### Respect and joy

Don's respect for others — no matter their background — earned their respect for him. Angela Fairless spearheaded the skatepark development many years ago and often attended council meetings to earnestly urge Don and the council to act on sensitive issues, including homelessness, police issues and marijuana legal-

ization. She opposed him as a mayoral candidate in the 2014 election.

"I've come to believe that you learn more about a man's character when challenging him than when you work cooperatively alongside him," Fairless posted on Facebook following Don's death. "I did both with this man, and what I learned is that his character was solid and good."

When I think of Don, I remember his joy for life.

I remember his glee at holding a giant pair of scissors while cutting the ribbon to open the new library, now to be known as the Donald E. Larson Library. I remember him laughing and grunting while he worked to unroll the artificial turf at Broadway Park, signaling the start of a long-awaited improvement project. During Fourth of July parades, he used to love climbing into "Old Mac," the Seaside Fire Department's antique fire engine, and waving to the crowds. At somber ceremonies, such as the annual Pearl Harbor commemoration, Don, a retired staff training officer for the U.S. Army Reserve, delivered comforting words to veterans.

In 2009, several local volunteers built a time capsule, a tube 24 inches around and 5 feet long, to contain students' drawings, newspapers, aerial photos and other memorabilia in honor of Oregon's 150th anniversary. The capsule was unveiled at the Broadway Park dedication.

Don was pretty happy that day. All sorts of dignitaries were there, including former Oregon Gov. Barbara Roberts. It was a beautiful summer afternoon. After the ceremony, when no one was looking (except me with my camera), Don, in a playful mood, crawled inside the empty, open capsule. I have a photo of just his legs hanging out.

If we could only encapsulate the time we spent with Don, what a good thing that would be! But we still have our memories of the example he set for Seaside: Continue to love it and keep it shining.

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## Don Larson remembered for his dedication

Former boxing champion Muhammad Ali once said, "Service to others is the rent you pay for your room here on Earth." This quote conjures up memories of Mayor Don Larson who died Dec. 11 at the age of 80.

Larson, who passed away after a long battle with cancer, chalked up an impressive record of public service and will be remembered for his dedication to the City of Seaside. Larson, however, was not without controversy and left many people feeling conflicted. He was stubborn on some policies and bullied his way trying to get the ODOT Highway 101 vote to pass. This then raises the question of how exactly do we remember him? Do we gloss over the conflicts or honor his accomplishments?

While I attended his memorial service on Friday, it became clear that Mayor Larson would be remembered for his accomplishments; his motives were always to advance the city and soon became one of Seaside's most enduring advocates.

Larson was mayor of Seaside from 2002 to 2016. He has been credited for his dedication to Seaside, to his church, his family, and to the children of the AWA-NA youth group. He was instrumental in putting Seaside on the Tree City map and active within the League of Oregon Cities, as well as serving on several committees and commissions throughout his tenure.

He was a positive force in seeing the



### GUEST COLUMN

REBECCA HERREN

expansion and renovation of Broadway Park, including a skate park and boat ramp. He saw the fulfillment of the new library, the installation of the lights at the intersection of Broadway and Columbia streets, and most recently, the renovation of the North Holladay Drive project.

One of his strengths as mayor of the city he loved so much didn't necessarily come from his stalwart work ethic and tireless commitment to fulfilling his duties, it was that he understood and advocated for the city's residents regardless if you agreed with him or not. He understood that people wanted to live here in Seaside for the quality of living, the services the city provided and the recreation amenities.

His success as mayor was reflected in his recurring reelection — some uncontested and without a platform. Despite his disappointment that the ODOT Highway 101 project failed, most voters in Seaside believed Larson was a good mayor, and in many ways, he was. He was a hands-on mayor who served the city well.

His fellow leaders as well as former and current members of the community whose lives he touched over the years

admired him. And some, along with family members and clergy, offered heartfelt tributes to Larson during his memorial.

I met Mayor Larson in January 2014 when I became managing editor for the Seaside Signal, under the ownership of Dick and Margaret Larson (no relation). He was welcoming and always forthcoming with his time whenever I called. I regularly covered the council meetings and Larson quickly became a constant contact. He often gave me a call after reading the latest edition of the Signal to discuss this or that, especially when we disagreed on certain points. And, though I always respectively referred to him as Mayor Don Larson or Mayor Larson in those articles, I fondly called him just "mayor" anytime I saw him out and about, or during one of our many telephone conversations that he always ended by saying, "Thank you for making me sound good," or "Thank you for being truthful in your coverage," even if the coverage was negative.

After I left the Signal to become managing editor for another company, he tried hard to persuade me to return by saying, "You were the best editor the paper had and it really needs you back." It did not work, but it was a nice compliment. Years later, I realized he gave the same compliment to other former employees — and that is OK.

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## Nature in the raw is seldom mild

That was a cool trick for Bob Cook to copy George H. W. Bush and jump from an airplane on his 85th birthday. I trust he had the wind at his back. It was a buddy jump — reassuring, I would think. I wonder if they yelled "Geronimo" as they came down. That's traditional with paratroopers and it's in their song. I learned it from my husband who was in the paratroops in the 50s until he broke his back in a jump. It takes a special kind of person to do that — a brave person — and I'm not tryin' it 'til I get my wings!

It was a real revelation to me when during the previews to our election they talked about retaining the parts of Obamacare which concerned pre-existing conditions and keeping the 26-year -old "children" on their parent's policies. Egad. A 26-year-old person is not a child. When my brother was 27, I thought he was older than Methuselah. By the time someone is that age, shouldn't he be on his own and providing for himself? It's a different world to be sure.

The weather for Thanksgiving was inclement to say the least. Lots of thunder and lightning, too, though I didn't see it. Gary, his wife Connie, Robin and I went to the Shilo buffet for dinner. There was so much to eat so we sampled everything until it hurt. With a good seat by the window, we were thankful indeed. I just felt a pang for those who didn't have the same privilege. We are so blessed.

When the kids were totaling up their responsibility for the check, they decided on \$54.40 or fight! It was almost resolved that way. If I'm here for another Thanksgiving, I think I'll just have a sandwich and watch TV. Gary and I left about 5 p.m. while the girls stayed behind to visit. Their decision had its drawbacks. Thunder and lightning increased; rain was torrential and people in the restaurant became somewhat alarmed. I didn't understand if the ocean came over the Prom or if it was just sheets of rain but it was not fun. When Robin returned to her motel near Avenue U, the area was flooded from the tide and she couldn't find the driveway. After some maneuvering, she discovered a parking place without being stalled in the river when it was pitch dark. As the saying goes, "Nature in the raw is seldom mild."

When I looked out the window on Dec. 10, two fawns were browsing in my yard. Their mother came later and was only slightly larger than they were. I really felt awful when, in a short while, the rain came down in torrents and they were caught in the middle. I would have asked them in but knew it wouldn't work. I just hate to think of all the wild animals caught in winter circumstances. It's no merry Christmas for them.

### Laugh line

Stop me if you've heard this: A man walked up to a store and saw a boy and his dog sitting by the entrance. "Does your dog bite?" asked the fellow.

"No, he doesn't," the kid answered.

The guy bent over to pet the dog, pulled back a bleeding, tooth-marked arm and exclaimed, "I thought you said your dog didn't bite!"

"That's not my dog," the kid told him.

### LETTERS

#### Larson was honest, sincere

As the former editor at The Seaside Signal, I worked closely with Don Larson covering many local city stories. Mayor Larson made sure he was always available for comment when I needed to balance our coverage of issues impacting the city. He always demonstrated an honest and sincere approach to city issues. When I first arrived in Seaside, Mayor Larson greeted me with open arms and his famous smile. He soon became a mentor and close friend.

Mayor Larson help guide Seaside forward during his time in office.

He will be missed.

Jeremy C. Ruark  
Clatskanie

#### Be informed on climate change

Claire Lovell's Dec. 9, "Scene & Heard" column in the Seaside Signal featured an opinion on climate change that had nothing to do with the bulk of the piece. Yet the paper chose to highlight this disconnected paragraph with an inflammatory headline, "Climate change: a roll of the dice," as if it was the main focus of the article.

Climate change deniers fall largely into two categories: those who are woefully uninformed and those who stand to profit from loosened regulations and gutted protections. We do indeed roll the dice with our children's future if we fail to act.

To discount the preponderance of evidence about the reality of climate change by saying, "God is in charge of the weather..." is to allow humans to shirk responsibility for damage they have done to the pristine planet we had "in the beginning." Unchecked climate change may indeed be God's vengeance.

But this is not really a religious issue. Nor is it red or blue.

Earth's rhythms may once have shifted naturally through past centuries but exponential population growth and practices employed to sustain it have pushed us to the tipping point. Man may have meant no harm but harm has been done. Our first act of reparation is to become informed. For an eminently watchable film highlighting the facts of climate change, see National Geographic's documentary

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