

Joe Retzler

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By Greg Barbu

First of all, before I begin, I must let you know that Joe Retzler believes he is nowhere near old enough to justify a senior tribute.

Joe Retzler is a Wooster native. He was born in 1928 on St. Patrick's Day. "Been lucky ever since" is what he told me.

His home was two doors down from the old high school. You'd think that would mean he would not have had any problem arriving on time – but no – it just gave him the opportunity to see how late he could leave his home and still arrive before the bell – or after.

He was active in the High School band, playing flute and piccolo – a skill that would serve him well in the future.

He graduated Wooster High School in 1946 and enrolled at the College of Wooster. Many G.I.'s were returning from the war at that point, so his class was made up of about half recent high school graduates and half returning servicemen. That, he said, created quite an atmosphere for change – as the older students were not willing to follow the strict rules of the college. During his time at the College he saw several of the rules revised. His favorite change was when they did away with the separation of the men from the women at daily chapel. Joe, you scamp!

During his senior year he stopped by Severance Gym to watch the women's synchronized swimmers perform. Now why would a college senior want to go watch women in swimsuits? There he found himself attracted to a cute first-year co-ed. He asked around, found out her name and called her for a date. Sue didn't know who was calling, so she looked him up in the photo directory. Ah yes, she recognized him. Sue often worked in the lower level of Kauke hall on the student newspaper and had seen this fellow coming down the fire escape past the office

window. She thought it pretty strange that he wouldn't use the stairs, but she said yes to his request for a date anyway. They dated awhile, but she had three more years of study ahead of her, and so they did not pursue a serious relationship.

Joe graduated in 1950 with a major in English. And then went into retailing in a big way.... well not really – he worked a summer at Newberry's. What he does remember of that experience was being instructed to cheat a bit during weighing at the peanuts at the nut counter. And that was something Joe just could not do.

That fall he was drafted into the armed forces, part of the second round of draftees for the Korean War. One day during basic training there was a request for musicians to try out for the division band. Joe was accepted and it changed his service career for the better. His division went to Germany where he was stationed on what had been a German fighter base now used by the Americans. The musician's housing was in an old WAC dormitory. These were much nicer quarters than the other draftees had. This was Joe's first time out of the U.S. and out of Wooster for that matter. While others were spending there free time on base, he made it a point to explore Europe, going to Paris, Milan, Venice, Amsterdam, London, Stuttgart. Well you get the idea. He really enjoyed traveling. His band entertained the American troops stationed in Germany and also played concerts for the Germans, who he said, were very appreciative of their music.

Joe sums up his armed forces experience like this "Glad I had the experience. Wouldn't want to do it again."

When he returned to Wooster his parents had purchased Wayne Hardware and Supply. It was located in what was recently the Red Cross building, just north of the Parlor. He worked at the store for a year, and then returned to school, this time to Columbia University in New York City. There he learned that a Midwest boy could survive in the big city, that the Columbia professors were no better than the ones at the College

of Wooster and that native New Yorkers are clueless about anything west of the Hudson River. He graduated in 1955 with a Masters in Business Administration.

Back in Wooster, he returned to work at the hardware store. Sue had graduated from the College, taught two years in Smithville and returned to Hackensack, NJ. I guess Joe just couldn't get that Wooster lovely out of his mind, because he contacted her and then visited. When Joe proposed, Sue at first thought he was joking. When she realized he was serious, she made him go to ask her father for her hand. They were married in July of 1956, which, if I have done my calculations correctly, makes this the year of their fiftieth wedding anniversary. Sue and Joe have five children and 10 grandchildren.

Joe, Sue and their children were active in soccer and they, along with several other Rotary families helped start the soccer program at the high school. Joe was an avid long distance cyclist – he and Sue have ridden in a number of bike tours. One of Joe's favorites was the Tour of the Scioto River Valley – from Columbus to Portsmouth and back in two days -- 210 miles in all. The family also skied - spending many weekends at nearby resorts. Sue told me of the time Joe insisted on one last run down a hill before they left for the day. Well, Sue looked back to see Joe's skis in the air and him in a pile of snow. When she reached him he was disoriented and moaning. No stretcher sleds were available so the Ski Patrol took Joe off the hill on the garbage sled. He had dislocated his shoulder, which Sue said he put back into place himself while recovering in the Ski Patrol hut, and then she drove him home. He's a tough guy, that Joe Retzler.

In 1964 the hardware store went modern. They constructed a building just north of the old store and that became the new hardware store, now carrying the family name. About the same time they were moving into the new building, they purchased the inventory of Wooster Hardware – which had been located across from the courthouse where the National City parking lot is. It created quite a contrast moving the new items into

the store while cleaning out the Wooster Hardware building. At the Wooster Hardware building they found old boxes with powder horns, signs advertising Gerstenslager buggies, and other long forgotten items. They took what they could use and auctioned the rest. Wouldn't those items be a find for a Rotary Auction today?

The Retzler hardware expansion was successful. Joe kept the store competitive by joining the TruValue co-op. He is very proud that Retzler's Hardware was usually in the top ten TruValue stores in Ohio and in the top 100 in the nation. The store expanded twice more, adding more sales and warehousing space. At one time it employed 37 people. When I asked Joe the secret of his retail success, he said only that he treats customers with respect. He really seemed to enjoy helping customers find the right item when they needed it. That doesn't mean there weren't problems, but Joe had a way of seeing the good in every situation and not letting the daily problems get him down.

Joe joined Rotary in 1964. He said he enjoys the interesting people and the caring nature of the club.

Joe retired after 47 years in the hardware business and Retzler Hardware became Mike Tignor's Hometown Hardware. I asked Joe what he missed about working at the store. He said helping the customers, meeting new people, and also the professional contact that he made, both as a storeowner and as a leader of the Ohio Hardware Association.

He didn't leave retail sales completely though. He is busy as a volunteer for the Habitat for Humanity store. Joe asked me to put in a plug for them – if you have any old cabinets, appliances or even paints, they can be sold at the store and help provide housing for people in need. He continues to maintain his positive outlook on life, seeing the good in everyone he meets.

Joe also has had two open-heart surgeries, but hasn't let that slow him down either. So I think you can see why Joe doesn't think of himself as ready for this, a very well deserved but premature, senior tribute.