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Frown? Get out of town

RCP's Person of the Year keeps grinning and giving back... no matter what life gives him

JOHN AND his wife, Celia, stand near a lighthouse during a visit to Maine. John's T-shirt reflects his penchant for new adventures.

by Tim Lyke

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By all counts, the Ripon Commonwealth Press' 2009 Person of the Year should be one grumpy guy.

John Roesch Sr. grew up in a tough, working-class little Indiana town.

After joining the Marines, his leg was shot in the Korean War.

Roesch settled with his family in Ripon, only to become a widower father of six after losing his wife, Kathryn, to Lou Gehrig's disease.

"Life has thrown all sorts of tragedy at him," Ripon attorney and fellow Noon Kiwanian Steven Sorenson said of his good buddy. "But he didn't grow up to be [bitter]. He's always kept a positive attitude no matter what life's thrown his way."

Roesch, 79, has been able not only to survive adversity but to emerge from it more determined in his efforts to alleviate the adversity faced by others — and typically with a smile.

"He has a great sense of humor," friend Gib Stoeberl said. "He's charitable, caring and empathetic about people's

feelings, especially those who are in need."

Not that he always was so charitable. While growing up in Whiting, Ind., Roesch was "kind of a bully in high school," said Ann Ladwig, his youngest daughter.

PUTS OTHERS FIRST

But somewhere, somehow, Roesch grew to realize the sun was smiling on him.

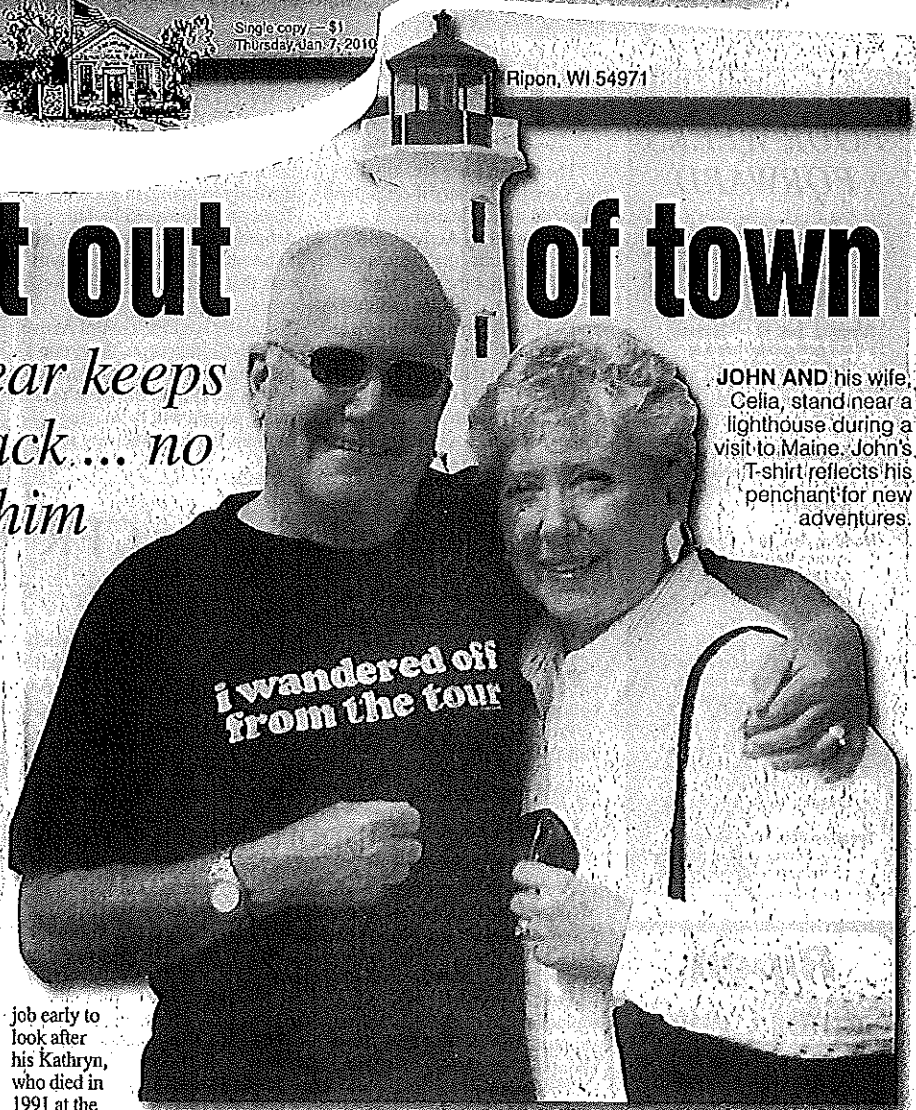
"He's probably the most positive person that I've ever met," Sorenson said. "He always puts others ahead of himself... if you need a friend, he's there. If he senses I

[have a problem, for example,] he'll call me at my office on a Saturday and say, 'Let's go for a ride.'"

Likewise, he always has been available for his children. "He's been there for us," Ladwig said. "He always read to us at bed time. We'd be at home together and suddenly, out of the blue, he'd break into song. He taught us the fun part of life, as well as teaching us about [the importance of] character, family, leadership."

Although the former senior supplier quality engineer left Alliance Laundry Systems in 1991, Roesch is retired but not retiring.

He quit his



job early to look after his Kathryn, who died in 1991 at the age of 62.

"He retired early to take care of her in her end stages," Ladwig said.

Kathryn's husband and youngest daughter were his primary caregivers toward the final days.

Ladwig recalls visiting with her Dad while Kathryn was dying.

"She'd be in the next room and Dad would talk to me about how much he loved marriage and family," Ladwig said. "He told me he'd marry again because he had loved that relationship [with Kathryn], because it was so good with her."

DOESN'T 'MAKE A SHOW'

If Roesch has had two lives, his second one began not when he retired but in 1993, when he married Celia Horrigan after the two met through a mutual friend.

"I thought he was a wonderful man," said Celia, who had been widowed for 10 years upon meeting the widower.

"He was just who I was looking for: Loving, kind, lots of fun yet very thoughtful as well.

"From the time I met him, I

knew this was the man I'd like to spend the rest of my life with."

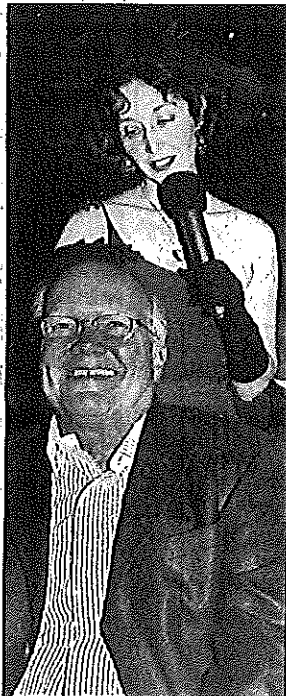
Roesch is a gentleman, she said. "He's the sort who holds the car door open for you."

But he's also a post-feminist

male, cheerfully abiding by an arrangement with Celia to alternate days one cooks for the other.

"We work at our marriage so."

See GRINNING/ back page



GREEN LAKE FESTIVAL of Music President John Roesch endures teasing by a chanteuse during an event at Thrasher Opera House. submitted photo



ALTHOUGH A PEOPLE person, John Roesch is perfectly comfortable alone with his tools, building in his workshop at home. submitted photo

GRINNING/Roesch travels regularly to Jonestown, Miss., to volunteer

that it stays strong, and to be good examples for our children," she said.

When not doing for her, Roesch is doing for others — but always quietly.

"He makes a difference without making a show," Sorenson said.

Roesch is president of the Green Lake Festival of Music board of directors ("el presidente" as he refers to himself); treasurer of the Thrasher Opera House; faithful follower at St. Catherine of Siena; volunteer for Ripon Medical Center; and a passionate cheerleader and board member for Habitat for Humanity.

In fact, safe to say that no one in Ripon has helped build as many homes in Jonestown, Miss. (60 miles south of Memphis) as Roesch.

BUILDS HOMES FOR OTHERS

He became involved with Habitat after reading about a nun, Sister Pat, who upon retirement decided to move her ministry to the deep South, helping build homes for those in need.

Brother John called Sister Pat. She converted him.

"She said, 'You know John, you can't get to heaven in a rocking chair,'" Celia said.

"Twice a year for 17 years Roesch has been making the day-long pilgrimage to Mississippi. Ripon-area residents who have accompanied his home-building missions understand Roesch's routine: If you leave Ripon at 4 a.m., you can get down to Jonestown by 5 or 6 p.m., allowing time for a good night's sleep before swinging the hammer.

"Last year was the first time John didn't go down; the Habitat organization didn't have enough money to buy materials," Celia said.

"It was a big disappointment for him. That's his baby. He lives to go down there and the people down there love him. I'm sure he'll go down there as long as he can."

One of many Ripon residents who John has brought down to Mississippi is Gib Stoeberl.

Stoeberl recalls arriving at the modest Habitat dorm, only to see a couple utility workers getting into their vehicle.

Roesch approached the men, thanking them for keeping the power on during their stay.

The men informed the tempo-

ment for service.

Roesch quietly paid the bill out of his own pocket.

The rest of the week was normal, Stoeberl said. "We paid for gas, groceries and other expenses; worked our butts off for a week;

and lived in accommodations that were,

shall we say,

"interesting."

And then

it was time

to leave,

Roesch had

the volun-

teers teach for their wallets one,

more time.

"We normally leave \$175 here for seed money for the next group," Roesch told Stoeberl. "Yeah, it's kind of what we do."

"I don't think all the creys do that," Stoeberl said. "But John's crew does that."

DOESN'T SAY NO

The only thing that one day may hold Roesch back are his knees.

The left one is getting tired, causing him to trade his delivering of

Meals on Wheels to substituting at Ripon Medical Center's reception desk.

The right one has been non-

functional since Roesch was shot during the Korean War; the injury forced a doctor to fuse his knee,

making it unable to bend.

But that hasn't stopped Roesch from biking, walking, singing,

building, volunteering, laughing and serving others.

"John doesn't know how to say no," Celia said.

That may be because he doesn't act — or acknowledge — his age.

"John doesn't consider himself old," Sorenson said of the man who will turn 80 this June. "He thinks he's 40 or 50 years old. If you told John that in five years he could be in a wheelchair, it wouldn't compute with him. He doesn't think that way."



JOHN ROESCH SR. stands two years ago with his six children, who wife Celia says "love him to pieces." They are, from left, daughters Paula and Barb, son John Roesch Jr., daughters Karen, Mary and Ann. *submitted photo*

"He rides a bike when others would complain," Sorenson said. "He walks when others say it's too cold."

Roesch once spent a week, limping like a pirate as he crewed on the deck of a three-masted replica of a 19th century schooner, the Denis Sullivan, as it plied the waves of the Great Lakes.

Roesch perseveres in spite of, if not because of, his handicap.

RIDES RECUMBENT BIKE

Because he can't bend his knee, Roesch rides a recumbent bike.

He'd read a newspaper article about four years ago concerning a woman who races the bike — a low-to-the-ground two-wheeler powered by a rider in a laid back position who uses arms to turn the wheels rather than the traditional foot pedals.

Roesch called the woman to



Celia said.

She marvels at how Roesch hears a few notes and can then instantly tell her the composer's name.

"John has taught me how to appreciate classical music," she said.

And when the Roesches tune the TV to channel 941 for some easy listening music, the competition can get fierce as the two battle it out to see which one can identify the artist and composer.

"He's always eager to expand his knowledge," said Stoerber, a former high school civics teacher. "He audits classes at Ripon College."

The reason Resch attends classes, Sorenson said, is that "he recognizes that you will die if you don't keep exercising not only your body, but your mind as well."

Roesch currently is auditing Ripon College religion professor the Rev. Brian Smith's "History of Christianity" course.

"He's a fine student who asks good questions," Smith said. "He's an inspiration to other students because he demonstrates that learning is a lifelong pursuit."

Roesch is a student of Christianity, yes, but a practitioner as well.

"His faith in the golden rule and the tenets of Christianity are his foundation," Sorenson said.

Roesch's many good works are not his duty, Sorenson said. "They are his calling."

CHILDREN REVERE HIM

Student, cyclist, musician, builder, volunteer, sailor, cook, husband, father, grandfather, joke teller, benefactor — Roesch is successful at all of those roles because of the low-key way in which he performs them.

"He does the unexpected but he does it in a common, simple way," Sorenson said. "He does it in a way that people don't notice but that leaves the world a little better place every day. It happens without his planning; it's who he is."

That's why his six children — Paula, Barb, John, Karen Mary and Ann — revere their not-so-old man.

"He's a wonderful father to his children," Celia said. "They love him to pieces."

Proof that Roesch is a special man comes from his children and friends, but none puts it quite like his soulmate.

"I had a very happy [first] marriage," Celia said. "You can't beat that, I figured. But John has proved me wrong."

learn more.

After he and Celia spotted a man riding a recumbent bike along the sidewalk in Hilton Head, S.C., Roesch turned the car around and introduced himself to the fellow

— a paraplegic — who proceeded to let Roesch take his bike for a spin.

Last July Roesch rode his bike to the corner of Thomas and Grace streets, serving as flag man for the Ripon Noon Kiwanis' Doug Lyke Road Run.

Noon Kiwanis is a critical part of Roesch's life.

"He wouldn't miss it," Celia said. "He enjoys the people there."

And he's been known to tell a joke or two.

"He has a great sense of humor," Celia said.

"But he's never raw or raunchy," Sorenson said.

"He's naturally happy and naturally positive and fills the room [with his joy]."

Roesch also can fill it with his voice. The avid singer regularly performs with the Green Lake Festival of Music Choir, as well as Ripon College's Choral Union.

He once built a clavichord — a European stringed keyboard instrument — and then donated it to Ripon College.

Roesch also made a Celtic harp for his friend, Beaver Dam retired pathologist Bill Richards.

ENJOYS CLASSICAL MUSIC

But he also can appreciate music with his mouth closed and his arms at his side, at least sort of.

"We always listen to music while we eat."

Past RCP 'Person of the Year' honorees

- 1991 — Phil Deaton
- 1992 — Ed Bumby
- 1993 — Emil Reinsch
- 1994 — Ronie Eichstedt
- 1995 — Craig Tebon
- 1996 — Rob Webster
- 1997 — Doris Riggs Miller
- 1998 — Karyl Zahorik
- 1999 — George Miller
- 2000 — Bob Somers
- 2001 — Tom Rogers
- 2002 — Maurice Morgan
- 2003 — Bob Lukoski
- 2004 — Laurie Kasuboski
- 2005 — Joan Karsten
- 2006 — Audrey Conant
- 2007 — Dave Schoff
- 2008 — Burton Gunn