



Courtesy photos/Nova Lamela-Johnson

Mike Johns, left, helps a young angler with his catch during a fishing derby at Travis Air Force Base that Kids Day of Fishing Inc. helped organize.

# 'We won't quit either'

## Event co-founder vows to build on his father's legacy of helping children in need



Larry Johns co-founded Kids Day of Fishing Inc., a non-profit serving disabled and underprivileged children through outdoor activities.

BY JOE GIOVANNETTI  
DAILY REPUBLIC

Larry Johns will be remembered as a man who never took time to rest even though he deserved it, even when he needed it.

Those who knew Johns before he passed away on May 4 at the age of 72 from internal bleeding related to colon cancer, spoke of three things when reminiscing about a father and friend weeks after his passing: Johns' devotion to his country, his community and his threshold for pain.

"Larry lived for those in need," said Jack Maley, president of the Kiwanis Club of Fairfield and a friend of Johns. "He was unselfish with his time and effort. When you think of underprivileged kids, you think of Larry Johns."

Johns' commitment to his causes was like that of a marriage; he pledged his time in sickness and in health for as long as he lived.

That's why his passing came with a sense of surprise in the community. Few knew Johns had been battling colon cancer and that he devoted what energy remained to his latest cause, the Kids Day of Fishing, between chemotherapy treatments.

Johns and his youngest son Mike co-founded Kids Day of Fishing Inc., a non-profit organization dedicated to empowering children with disabilities, underprivileged children and their families through outdoor activity, in 2006.

The second annual Kids Day of Fishing is scheduled to take

### At a glance

The second annual Kids Day of Fishing event at Lake Solano Park gives children with disabilities and underprivileged children the chance to feel empowered through outdoor activity. The event is being hosted by the Kiwanis Club of Vaca Valley.

**When:** Event begins at 9 a.m. Saturday, June 7

**Where:** Lake Solano Park

**Info:** 425-9792; <http://kidsdayoffishing.org/>

place at Lake Solano Park on June 7 and though it will be tough for those involved to go on without the organization's co-founder and leader, they will think of Larry Johns and summon the strength, like he did so many times before.

"It was hard for me watching

pop battle through what he had to," Mike said. "But he never complained and when things needed to be done, he did them. He wouldn't quit. That's what he's put in me and that's how the Kids Day of Fishing came about and moved forward. We won't quit either."

Larry Johns was born in 1935 in Chandler, Ariz., but he had a second home in the sky after enrolling in the Air Force.

Johns' 30-year career in the Air Force took him to Germany, where he met his wife, Anni; Lincoln, Neb., where he and Anni raised their three sons Lee, Mark and Mike; and numerous other locations before he retired to Fairfield as a Chief Master Sergeant.

One assignment brought the Johns family to Fairbanks, Alaska, Mike's favorite stop on his family's world tour.

"I was about 12 years old when I remember my dad giving me my first rod and reel," Mike said. "I went to the river and every single time it went down, a fish got on."

From that point on, Mike -- like the many fish he would catch over the next 30 or so years -- was hooked.

Larry felt the same way. He loved Fairbanks and the chances it gave him to be completely at peace in nature. He'd fly-fish whenever he got the opportunity because at any time a transfer could prompt Larry to pack up the family and move again. When duty called, Larry always answered.

In 1968, the Johns family drove on a Southern California highway when their car was struck by a van while Larry attempted to merge onto the freeway. The children suffered some bruises. Anni got the worst of it, a broken nose.

After pulling the car over and surveying the status of his family, Larry looked out the window and saw a man lying in the middle of the freeway. The van that hit the Johns' car sped off, leaving behind this passenger who had somehow fallen out of the vehicle.

Larry didn't hesitate. He grabbed road flares out of the car and headed out on the highway. While attempting to save the stranger and direct traffic, Larry was hit by a car trying to serve around him.

The car dragged Larry for more than 300 agonizing feet before he broke free. Larry's legs suffered extreme trauma and dismemberment. He spent more than a year in the hospital



Brad Zweerink/Daily Republic

Larry Johns' sons Lee, left, and Mike with their mom, Anni. Mike co-founded Kids Day of Fishing Inc. with his dad.

# Legacy: Second annual Kids Day of Fishing is scheduled for June 7

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rehabilitating before he could walk on his own again.

The man Larry attempted to save was unharmed in the process.

"It wasn't the accident that he did that," Mike said. "He always wanted to help another person, even if he had to put himself out there to do it."

For his effort, the Air Force awarded Larry the Airman's Medal, given to service members who distinguish themselves by heroic actions as a civilian.



Upon retirement from the Air Force, Larry dedicated the later years of his life to community service. He joined the Lyons club in the 1970s and the Kiwanis club in the 1990s.

Larry raised more than \$20,000 for the Kiwanis Family House, which provides temporary housing and support to families of seriously ill or injured children being treated at the UC Davis Medical Center.

"Larry just had that knack to make every event



Courtesy photos/Nova Lamela-Johnson

**Kids and their parents cast their lures into the water during a fishing derby at Travis Air Force Base last May that Kids Day of Fishing Inc. helped organize.**

he had his hands on be very successful," Maley, president of the Kiwanis Club of Fairfield, said.

Two years ago, Mike decided he wanted to start giving back to the community too. He discussed it with his dad -- there were, after all, few better at that sort of thing -- who offered his support and an idea; the event should revolve around Mike sharing his passion of fishing with disabled and disadvantaged children.

Mike began researching the fundraising possibilities for such an event and discussed the ideas with members of the community. One

day, he discovered that word of his idea had already spread.

When Mike was leaving a Longs Drug Store parking lot one day, a woman approached his car and motioned frantically for him to roll his window down. A stranger in need? As a Johns, he had to oblige.

"I said 'Are you OK?'," Johns said.

The woman pointed to Johns' hat promoting his idea, the Kids Day of Fishing, and replied: "I've seen that hat. Are you helping children with special needs? Can I be a part of it?"

She handed Johns \$20. In

2007, the Kids Day of Fishing Inc. raised more than \$10,000. This year, Johns expects that number to approach \$18,000.

"The money we raised to do what we do started from that \$20," Johns said.

After running an event in 2006 with the help of the Kiwanis Club, Kids Day of Fishing Inc. became a full-fledged non-profit organization last year and hosted more than 100 children at the first official Kids Day of Fishing event. Children who participated received rods, reels and one-on-one assistance from adults teaching them how to fish.

"What I noticed most about last year," said Sherry Rodgers of Fairfield, who attended with her 8-year-old autistic son Xander, "was that I could relax because my son was so accepted by that group for who he was. I've tried many different programs to integrate him with other kids and he hasn't experienced that anywhere else."



Doctors gave Larry Johns a choice: Move in with a

Hospice caregiver or undergo an even more extreme form of chemotherapy than he had been facing for the last 18 months.

Hospice wasn't an option, at least not to Larry. He wanted to be home. The doctors respected his opinion, but told him that they estimated that there was only a one-in-10 shot that he would survive long enough to see the treatment through.

One-in-10 might have been as slim as finding a dollar on Wall Street during rush hour, but, for Larry, it was enough. Hospice would restrict his freedom and there was still work to be done for Kids Day of Fishing Inc.

Mike and Larry had agreed to help the 60th Services Squadron at Travis Air Force Base host a fishing derby on May 4 for Air Force families. The Johns had been coordinating with Brian Floyd, 60th Service Squadron deputy director, since December 2007.

"Larry never mentioned to me that he had cancer," Floyd said. "I would've never known except we met every Thursday and when I

tried to reschedule one meeting for Wednesday Mike said Larry would be undergoing chemotherapy treatments that day."

Larry felt too ill to attend the derby at Travis Air Force Base on May 4. He passed away that night just hours after receiving a plaque from the 60th Services Squadron inscribed, "In appreciation to Larry Johns and the Kids Day of Fishing Inc. Larry, you are a true hero with true inner strength."

"I think Larry would like to be remembered for what he gave to his country and community," said Mike Segala, Councilman for the City of Suisun and the immediate past president of the Kiwanis Club of Suisun City. "Larry didn't stop giving. That's who Larry Johns was. And what he left behind, that's who Larry Johns is, a man who inspired everyone to give a little more to the community than we think we're capable of giving."

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