

DENNIS HEATH: HIS LIFE

Dennis was born on 8/6/1950 in Portland, Oregon to Melvin and Helen Berg Heath. He joined a brother Roland who was born on 8/17/1937. Later another brother, Curt, was born on 7/16/1947. Dennis grew up in Portland. He attended Harvey Scott Elementary School from grades one through eight. He graduated from Madison High School in 1958 where he had been class president and then graduated from Portland State in 1962. Dennis married Kathleen (Katsy) Beeman on May 26, 1962 in Portland, Oregon where they had met in German class while attending Portland State. They moved to Dubuque, Iowa where Dennis attended Wartburg Lutheran Seminary. He served as a student pastor in Daytonville, Iowa and after graduation in 1967 he was ordained as a Lutheran Minister and began organizing a mission church, Lord of Love Lutheran Church, in Belton, Missouri. He and Katsy adopted two sons, Jeremy in 1966 and Joel in 1969. They were divorced in 1970 and Katsy moved back to Portland with Jeremy and Joel.

Dennis had become disillusioned with organized religion and what he saw as its attendant bureaucratic roadblocks to actually serving the community. He decided to could be more effective helping people as a social worker rather than a pastor and enrolled at the University of Kansas where he received his Master of Social Work degree in May of 1971. He began working at a community mental health center when he met Ann Kister who was also working there. They were married on Nov 27, 1971 and shortly after moved to Salem, Oregon to be near his sons, Jeremy and Joel. He began working as a social worker and community organizer at Fairview Training Center in 1972 where he would later become a Unit Director. It was during this time that Dennis became the driving force behind the creation of the self-advocacy group for people with disabilities, People First. Dennis and Ann had two children, Joshua born in 1972 and Joanna born in 1974. They were divorced on November 14, 1981.

Dennis and Stephany met through their children's activities and friendships at Morningside Elementary. He had coached all of them at one time or another in baseball or soccer. They were married on February 7, 1987. They blended their families and Dennis became the proud Dad of Colin born in 1972, Aden born in 1973, Devon born in 1975 and Stephany's nephew, Justin, born in 1973 in addition to Jeremy, Joel, Joshua and Joanna.

Dennis retired from Fairview in 1996. He had become a licensed clinical social worker in 1985 and after leaving Fairview opened a private counseling practice. During this period, he also provided counseling services to several area assisted living and nursing home facilities. In 2003 he joined Willamette Valley Hospice as a Spiritual Counselor where he worked until he retired in 2015.

Dennis had a gift for accepting people for who they were. He spent his life in service to others, especially those who society marginalized. From starting a church for the poorest of the poor early on, to encouraging and mentoring the developmentally disabled to be their own advocates through the People First movement he helped found and finally helping those who at the end of their lives were the most vulnerable through his work in nursing homes and Willamette Valley Hospice, Dennis defined himself by what he could do to help those who needed help.

Dennis showed his blended family that same unconditional love. Whether his children were adopted, biological, step children or his wife's nephew he treated them all the same. When he and Stephany married and blended families in 1987, they ended up with six children at South Salem High School. Dennis was an involved parent in all the ensuing teen age school activities-and all the teen age drama. The family even nicknamed him Inspector Cousteau because of his ability to sense and track down their various teen-age unsanctioned adventures It definitely made for some good stories!

Dennis loved sports. Growing up he and his brothers were enthusiastic and committed baseball players. While at Portland State University Dennis played baseball at as a short stop. In 1962 his Viking Baseball team won the Oregon Collegiate Conference Championship and went on to the National Championship in St. Joseph, Missouri where they finished second in the nation. Dennis was named an honorable mention All-American. He had the opportunity to sign with the Milwaukie Braves but decided to go into the ministry instead. In 2012 Dennis and his 1962 Viking Baseball team were inducted into the Portland State University Athletic Hall of Fame. He was very proud of that personal and team honor.

Dennis also loved coaching his children's soccer and baseball teams. If he wasn't coaching, he was making it to everyone's games from soccer to baseball to track to football even when they were spread out. Sometimes they reported they could tell when he made it to a game because they could smell his ever-present pipe tobacco before they even spotted him!

After the children were grown and he and Stephany retired, he enjoyed traveling and camping in their RV with their dogs and, later, their grandchildren. Dennis was a wonderful grandfather and he spent countless hours patiently playing whatever games or activities his grandchildren came up with. He was so proud of all their individual accomplishments. They were absolutely the joy of his later years.

The world is definitely a better place because Dennis was in it. He is much loved and will be sorely missed.

Survivors include his wife, Stephany Smith, children Jeremy Heath, Joel Heath, Joshua Heath, Joanna Heath, Colin Smith, Aden Smith, Devon Smith and Justin Robertson and grandchildren Ellery Smith, Sydney Smith, Heath Toomey, Brooks Toomey and Bowen Toomey. He is also survived by his brother Curt Heath. Sadly, his older brother Roland Heath died shortly before Dennis on September 19. Dennis had just officiated at Roland's funeral on September 28 and then he too was gone.

The Celebration of Life for Dennis was Wednesday, October 26 at 2:00 in the chapel at the Virgil T Golden Funeral Home, 605 Commercial St SE in Salem with a reception following.