



Ronald Johnson

July 16, 1943 - August 30, 2024

Ronald Johnson died on Friday, August 30, 2024, at home, with the voices of those he loved speaking to him and his favorite album, Willie Nelson's *Redheaded Stranger*, playing softly in the background. After a medical struggle to see one last summer, he went during a heavy rain and left us behind to a day that cleared to sunshine.

Ron was born on July 16, 1943, in Longview, Washington, the firstborn of Roy and Helen Johnson (Olmstead), and lived thirteen years in the rural Rose Valley/Nye Creek area. For several of those years, the family, which now included three little brothers—Lester (Carol), Steve (Marguerite), and Richard (Mary)—lived in a home Roy built with scrap lumber from the sawmill where he worked. Times were lean, but Helen always managed to make the family's home a warm sanctuary, with a positive outlook, clean clothes, and good food—even a pie or chocolate cake sometimes.

The summer Ron turned fourteen, his parents realized a generations-long dream and bought an eighty-acre cattle farmstead in the mountains near Sandpoint, Idaho. Ron led his three younger brothers in helping their father log in the farm's forest with a cross-cut saw and flatbed truck to make the annual mortgage payments. Throughout his young adulthood he often worked to help his family financially. He graduated from Sandpoint High School in 1961.

The family migrated periodically to California for the winter sunshine and promise of work, and it was during one of these migrations that Ron, the first

in his family go to college, transferred from the University of Idaho to Fresno State. Gifted in math but an avid reader, Ron chose to study writing and literature. In one literature class a fellow student noticed him, the dark, quiet, handsome guy who rolled his own cigarettes. Soon Ron and this California girl, Sheila Marie MacLure, were spending time around campus. On one date he waded into the wishing fountain to collect coins to afford two coffees. The two were married in 1967 and welcomed their son, Jonathan, later that year. Ron taught at Sequoia Junior High for two years, then enrolled in the Master of Fine Arts in fiction writing program at University of California, Irvine. Ron remained close to his parents, bothers, and brothers' families. With his encouragement and support, his brothers and mother followed his example and earned college degrees. Ron and Sheila welcomed their daughter Ann in 1972, and the family soon settled into Student Family Housing University Village East at the University of Utah. Happy years followed, as Ron and Sheila both pursued graduate degrees in English and raised their family on the campus beneath the mountains. The family moved to Redding, California, in 1976 for Ron to teach at Shasta Community College, and were joined there by Ron's parents. That year, Willie's Red Headed Stranger and some dancing cheered the family's little apartment. The family returned to University of Utah in 1977 for Ron and Sheila to continue their studies. During this time, Ron won the Utah Governor's Award for a first novel manuscript for *That Which Is Flesh*, served as Managing Editor for the national literary magazine *Western Humanities Review*, and completed his PhD.

In 1981, Ron took a faculty position at McNeese State University in Louisiana to help start a graduate writing program there. The family moved again in 1984 to Marquette, Michigan, on the shore of Lake Superior, so that Ron could join the faculty of Northern Michigan University. Marquette became the family's beloved hometown, and Ron and Shelia walked at Presque Isle Park daily when the ground was clear of snow. As a Professor of English at NMU, Ron helped found the nationally-respected graduate writing program, directed many dozens of fiction and nonfiction theses, and helped hundreds of student

writers find their words—and themselves. He retired in 2014 and is well-remembered around Marquette as a teacher of empathy, humor, insight, and deeply kind encouragement. In his writing career he won the Missouri Review Editor's Prize in Nonfiction (and bought a snow blower with the prize money), and published books including *Silver Thaw* (short stories), *The Last Rodeo* (novel), and *Anton Chekhov: A Study of the Short Fiction* (scholarship).

It gave Ron great joy to see Jonathan married to Amy Howko and Ann find her partner, John Nikolaros. He was thrilled to welcome granddaughter, Anya Howko-Johnson, in 2000. He spent years faithfully caring for, encouraging, and savoring life with Shelia as she faced serious health challenges and ultimately died in 2004. "I should build a monument to your Dad in the front yard," she told Jonathan and Ann her final week.

In 2007 Ron began a new, exciting chapter in his life with his marriage to Linda. He gained stepdaughter Julie (Larry), stepsons Delmar (Leisl) and Paul (Jessica) and grandchildren: Jesse, Kaley, Claudia, Emma, Isabella, twins Jake and Sam, and Sydney. Into his seventies Ron remained a dancer. He and Linda packed their dancing shoes along as they migrated between Marquette, California, and Sault Ste. Marie. Ron's final beloved home was on Davitt Street in Sault Ste. Marie where he and Linda lived wonderful days reading aloud to each other.

Ron loved the Russian writers, Tolstoy, Chekhov and Dostoevsky, and he enjoyed writing, Sunday dinners with family, old country music, Dodgers and Tigers baseball. Sundays, Ron and friend John loved watching classic film in the living room. Ron's favorite film was *Dr. Zhivago*. Ron was scholar, writer, teacher, and lover of life.

After a fall in April, Ron put up a valiant fight to recover. As summer ended, Ron ended his great story of 81 years, at home on Davitt Street where he was faithfully cared for by Linda, his wife of seventeen years. Thank you to wonderful Marcia, RN, and Residential Home Health RN Cindy who both gave excellent wound care making it possible for Ron to be home. Thank you,

Davitt Street neighbors Drew; Taylor, RN; Anthony; and Tori for your support. Thank you, home aid Shar for your love and care of Ron his last years. Thank you to the War Memorial Long Term Care staff and especially Cory, CN, whom Ron trusted for a shave and for transfers from bed to wheelchair. Memorial services will be planned and announced for next summer at Presque Isle in Marquette, Michigan, and in Sandpoint, Idaho.

No need to send flowers; enjoy them where you find them. Please remember Ron as you will with an act of kindness and generosity toward an underdog (perhaps via the Janzen Hotel or room at the Inn in Marquette, or by helping out a first-generation college student). And treat yourself to an attentive walk.

Family Life Funeral Homes assisted the family with arrangements.
Condolences may be left to the family at www.familylifefh.com.

As submitted by family.

Tribute Wall

IR

“ My condolences to Ron Johnson's family for their great loss. We were colleagues at NMU university: he was in the English Depart. while I was in Languages. We crossed paths throughout the years and I always found him to be a kind, relatable, very courteous person. I wish now that I had asked more question or had coffee with him to talk. The finality of death brings that "I wish I had..." in front of us. Is that one of his last lessons? He was gentle, a true gentleman, we are all honored by having met him.

Ileana Renfrew - October 12, 2024 at 06:05 PM

PK

“ Dr. Johnson's spirit will forever be honored here at Northern Michigan University. We are grateful to him for founding the graduate creative writing program and for being such a strong advocate for the power of words. With heartfelt condolences. — Dr. Patricia Killelea

Patricia Killelea - September 16, 2024 at 11:02 AM

LS

“ Dear Jonathan, Ann, and family,
Please accept my sincere condolences in the loss of your father. He was a thoughtful friend and inspiring colleague. I will always remember him and your mother and the kindness they extended to me in my early years at NMU.

Laura Soldner - September 13, 2024 at 10:00 AM

BM

“ Professor Johnson was a teacher of mine at Northern Michigan University in the late 80’s to early 90’s. He was one of the best teachers that I ever had and helped give me the confidence to graduate with a degree in education and pursue teaching as a career. I have the utmost respect for him and I am saddened by this loss.
My deepest condolences to his entire family.

Brian Mishica - September 12, 2024 at 10:48 PM

RD

“ We always enjoyed running into Ron at Creative Endeavors and other events around town. We will lovingly plan a hike in his honor.--Renee Dreiling and Alan Seymour

Renee Dreiling - September 12, 2024 at 04:41 PM

DH

“ It was a pleasure and a privilege to have been his physician for some years when he was living in Marquette. A thoughtful and kind man.

Dan Hardie - September 12, 2024 at 11:25 AM