

December 20, 1999

Dear Jerry,

This is the first time I've tried to use this Microsoft word processing program. Hope it works. Well so far so good. Also hope it arrives in your email in the same manner in which I have tried to format it.

Thank you for the photo rendition you created of the two of us standing together at our class reunion.

While we were talking with Phyllis I noticed your interest in the digital camera she was using. But I had no idea you had become a talented photographer and photo processor.

By the way . . . did you know Ben Lifson "made it big" as an artist using photography as his medium?

About 20 years ago I attended a lecture he presented at the Minneapolis Art Institute in which he displayed his work and commented on his favorite images, many portraying gaudy and garish Los Angeles residential homes and neighborhoods in a manner that provoked many laughs from his audience.

I'm especially pleased by your letter to me and how you expressed our being together again was one of the class reunion's highlights for you.

I hope this letter to you makes it clear to you how important you have been in my life.

While Judy and I were standing out on the Edina Country Club's veranda during the evening of our reunion, she asked me what person had the greatest effect on my life during my youth. I'm guessing she expected me to say Mr. Dahle.

Without hesitating I said this to her:

He's standing on the other side of that glass door over there, Judy. If it were not for Jerry

Bender, I doubt I would have had the life I enjoyed at Fulton Elementary School and Southwest High School.

When I arrived at Fulton in fourth grade, Jerry immediately let me into his life and his circle of friends. He made me feel as though I were his best friend. He invited me to stay overnight with him at his home on New Year's Eve. Made me feel as though I was a part of his family!

In 1950, I'm this geeky guy attending my fourth school in four years: two in Detroit, then another school in Circle Pines, Minnesota, 30 miles north of Minneapolis.

And then the next year I'm in this city school located in southwest Minneapolis. It had more kids crammed into it than the entire population of Circle Pines, a wood-tick town.

My family had moved away from Circle Pines after I had spent April, May and early June successfully playing hooky everyday because my third grade teacher broke her hip and her substitute didn't have me listed in her attendance roster.

All I learned in Circle Pines was how to remove wood ticks, fist fight, set forest fires. And oh yeah, how to steal candy from the grocery store. My socialization skills were zip.

At Fulton human relations skills mattered most on the school playground, that vast expanse of gravel where my most important learning experiences happened . . . with Jerry being my guide, friend and mentor.

When Jerry's sister was in eighth grade the eighth graders ruled Fulton. You remember. Your brother Dick was in Sandie's class. Dick and Ron McCombs and Paul Youngdahl and

Dave Myers and all the other eighth-grade gods would let Jerry and me run to the Big Ten grocery store. Less than a block from the playground. To get them Popsicles. We knew each guy's favorite flavors. Youngdahl grape, McCombs cherry, Myers banana, and Dick root beer.

During the playground lunch-hour ball games Jerry and I would hand each guy his Popsicle and they'd let us sit next to them along the Washburn Street fence when their team was at bat. Sometimes I actually got to sit next to Youngdahl. He was so cool. He would suck his popsicles while he was at bat AND while he was pitching!

They pounded the seventh graders every game, hitting home runs that went clear across the playground.

I never would have been able to stand within 100 feet of those gods if it were not for Jerry. Had they not been good friends of his sister Sandie, I'm guessing maybe he wouldn't have been able to, also. But then again, Jerry had this way of charming people who were older than him. He was slick.

While Jerry and I were attending Fulton, Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis were the most popular comedy team in the nation. And from fourth grade through eighth grade, I was always seeing myself as being like Jerry Lewis and seeing Jerry Bender as being like Dean Martin. I was often feeling as though I was a social embarrassment to him, perhaps sometimes just as Jerry Lewis had to have been an embarrassment to Dean Martin.

I didn't have the right stuff to be Jerry's friend or to associate with his friends. Jerry and his friends had class. They wore the right pink-and-black clothes, the right suede belts,

the right loafers, and they had the prettiest girlfriends. I didn't have any of that stuff going for me. But it never bothered Jerry.

No matter how dumb I looked or acted, he always stood by me, making me feel (and I supposed others feel) that I was his best buddy.

Jerry took me to Minneapolis Lakers basketball games. Getting us seats close to the players so we could actually hear what Jim Pollard and Vern Mickelson and George Mikan were saying to each other as year after year they would win NBA championships.

He showed me how to play basketball and in the spring of fourth grade, he got me on the Fulton fourth grade baseball team, talking the coach into letting me play right field. I struck out damn near every time at bat.

Sometimes I got a walk to first base. And never really hit more than a foul ball. But through fourth, fifth and sixth grade, Jerry saw to it that I was on each one of his baseball teams. In sixth grade I actually hit the ball once. A line drive to the shortstop.

Then in seventh grade he saw to it that I got to play second base in the lunch-hour games against the eighth graders! I had glasses then and could see the ball and could make a double play and get singles.

Then Jerry got me into his scout troop and made sure I got into his own patrol, the Wolf Patrol that had all the coolest guys in it.

We won all the troop's contests: log chopping, canoe races, fire building, swimming races, foot races, chariot races, you name it. We felt like we were the Special Forces of Troop 151.

In eighth grade he talked the coach of his football team, Eddie Bader, into letting me play tackle, even though I had never been on a football team before. I started every game. And with Wayne Swanson and Jerry in the backfield and John Lind at the other tackle position, we won all of our conference games!

Any teacher who knows anything about helping kids learn knows how important it is to build a kid's self-confidence and self-esteem. The teachers at Fulton (with the exception of Mrs. O'Leary) tended to not do that for me.

It was Jerry who made me feel important.

It was Jerry who made me a member of what our eighth grade teacher, Charmin' Carmen Caruso, dubbed as "The Big Four." Jerry, John Lind, Wayne Swanson, and me.

I suppose every eighth grade class that rules its school has a Dick Green, Ron McCombs, Paul Youngdahl and a Dave Myers.

A "Big Four."

By naming us "The Big Four," Mr. Caruso, perhaps unknowingly, built my self-esteem in a most significant way.

But that never could have happened for me without Jerry. While as a new kid in a new grade school, and while as a gawky geek needing to learn how to make friends.

As a kid in his first year of being an anxious teenager, what more could you ask for than to have a friend like Jerry Bender?

At our class reunion last October, it took me about two drinks and several cigarettes to tell Judy all of this out there on the veranda.

When I finished talking to Judy, she put her hand on mine and said, "Are you ever going to tell Jerry this?"

As I paused to answer, you opened the door to the veranda and walked toward us.

I looked at Judy and said, "I suppose I should."

She laughed and said, "Now's your chance."

You grinned at us and enthusiastically said, "Chance to do what?"

As if Judy and I had created some exciting plot to do something that could get us all in trouble.

Having been with Judy on the veranda in the cold October night air for more than a half hour, I was beginning to freeze my ass off.

So I simply said, "Judy wanted to know who I felt had the most profound effect on me during my youth. I told her it was you."

You laughed and said, "Well I have to tell you that the two men who had the most profound effect on me were Howie Loftquist and your father."

I've been trying my hand at writing a story about our experiences with Howie Loftquist's Boys Brigade. If it were not for you and Wayne Swanson I would never have had the privilege of being a part of that gang of guys, an experience that contributed to my conviction that the happiest year of my life was when I was 14 and everything seemed suddenly possible.

In the meantime, Jerry, I MUST get this collection of "stories" I have written in the mail to you. Many of them are about my experiences as a son of Ed Johnson, a man who was a giant in my eyes, a man who like Sam Bender, did an amazing job of raising splendid children.

Happy New Year Jerry! Always your friend, Paul