

A storyteller is silenced

Editor's Note: This column originally ran in the edition of the Yankton Daily Press & Dakotan.

By Randy Dockendorf

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WRITER'S
BLOCK

On his 17th birthday, Darrel Christopherson joined the U.S. Navy. The Vermillion teenager was so young that his father had to sign for him to enlist.

It was Feb. 12, 1941, and Christopherson was later assigned to a place called Pearl Harbor. He hadn't heard of the Hawaiian station but looked forward to serving his country and seeing the world.

He didn't realize he would become caught in history, as the Japanese launched the attack on Dec. 7, 1941, that drew the United States into World War II.

"Fortunately, most of us (on my ship) lived through it," he said.

Christopherson was serving on the USS Vestal, a repair ship tied to the USS Arizona that met its ill fate as Japanese bombers strafed the harbor.

"On that Sunday morning (of the attack), we were supposed to do minor repair work on a vessel," he said. "But on that Sunday morning, the Japanese had other ideas of what we were going to do."

In a matter of minutes, the attack claimed nearly 2,500 lives and wounded another 1,300.

Seventy years later, Christopherson returned to Pearl Harbor. This time, he went as a veteran paying homage to fallen comrades.

He made the trip to Hawaii last month with Konrad O'Hearn of Sioux Falls. With only five remaining Pearl Harbor survivors in South Dakota, they were part of an elite – and rapidly fading – fraternity.

On Sunday, the fraternity lost one of its most honorable members.

Christopherson died in his sleep, six days after returning from visiting the Pearl Harbor Memorial in Hawaii and 14 days before his 88th birthday.

Somehow, it was if Christopherson held on long enough for the trip.

I last saw Christopherson in December, when he spoke at the third annual "Pearl Harbor Remembrance Day" at the Yankton VFW Post. Christopherson said the trip to Pearl Harbor was made possible thanks to Bill Williams of Sioux Falls and others raising funds to cover all expenses for the two veterans.

"The people in Sioux Falls are doing it because they feel the Pearl Harbor survivors should go back for the final memorial," Christopherson said, believing it would be the last official commemoration. "This will probably be the last chance for any of us to get back to the memorial."

The fact was driven home that evening with the announcement that the National Pearl Harbor Survivors Association was turning in its charter after Dec. 31, 2011, because of the veterans' age and lack of support for the organization.

Because the funding and arrangements

weren't complete in time for the Dec. 7 anniversary, Christopherson and O'Hearn went the following month.

On Jan. 16, Christopherson made his last trip to the USS Arizona Memorial in Honolulu, accompanied by his wife of 66 years, Beatrice; daughter Kathi Larson of Yankton; and

grandchildren, Kaleb Christopherson and Kourtney Christopherson.

"(Darrel) was warmly welcomed on every airline flight, and he was treated like a hero throughout his visit in Hawaii," his obituary said. "On his final trip, he was thanked for his service to his country, signed people's books about W.W.II and Pearl Harbor, and had his picture taken with strangers who just wanted to have their photos taken with a true American hero."

During his Yankton appearance last December, Christopherson – proudly displaying his Pearl Harbor Survivor's cap – vividly recalled the bombing, as if he were still that teenage boy.

"It seems funny to this day, I don't remember hearing loud exploding or feeling the ship rock back and forth from the explosion," he said. "I don't know if there's too much going on or what."

But Christopherson immediately knew there was trouble. The attack left the Vestal with a hole in the bottom of the ship, and the craft started taking on water. The executive officer had ordered evacuation of the Vestal, caught in the line of fire. The skipper, who was blown over the side but swam back on board, would have none of it.

The Vestal crew was ordered to patch the hole in the bottom of the ship immediately and report for duty. The Vestal sailed the Pacific for two years as a basic repair ship working on 400 vessels.

Darrel and Beatrice visited Pearl Harbor shortly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The Christophersons later received a flag that had flown over the USS Arizona memorial. The couple displayed the flag at different events, eventually donating it to a museum at the University of South Dakota (USD) in Vermillion.

Rick Christopherson, Darrel's son, noted his father's attitude toward the Pearl Harbor attacks.

"For the 50th anniversary commemoration, they gave my dad a medal as a Pearl Harbor survivor," Rick said. "They had Dad go up and speak. He said, 'Don't blame the Japanese people of today for what happened in 1941. Their kids

don't know any more about it than our kids do."

After surviving Pearl Harbor, Christopherson served 20 years in the Navy, then returned home to serve 23 years with the Vermillion Police Department. He was active in the

American Legion and VFW, and he taught Americanism and flag etiquette in the Vermillion schools.

At age 80, Christopherson retrieved the missing piece of his life's puzzle by graduating with the Vermillion High School Class of 2004. He took advantage of a change in state law allowing school districts to award diplomas to World War II veterans who did not complete high school because of military service.

At the commencement ceremony, he received a long standing ovation from the capacity crowd in Slagle Auditorium on the USD campus.

"I think it's real nice," Christopherson told me in an interview. "When I retired 18 years ago, I never thought I would go back to high school. But now I'm graduating, and the school even furnished the cap and gown for me."

Rick Christopherson said he wasn't surprised by his father's desire to receive his diploma. "Then again, so many things Dad did in the past didn't surprise me," Rick said.

Darrel grew up in a family of about a dozen children during the Depression, leaving high school and entering the Navy to help support his family, Rick said. Darrel's desire to receive his diploma was spurred on by his continuous contact with students interested in his Pearl Harbor experiences, Rick said.

Christopherson could have privately received his diploma the previous year, but he wanted to walk down the aisle with the rest of his "classmates." Darrel's participation in the graduation ceremony sent a powerful message to the other graduates, Rick said. "A lot of what he has already done has given those kids the freedom to walk across the stage," Rick added.

NBC News anchor Tom Brokaw, a Pickstown and Yankton native who graduated from USD, bestowed Christopherson and his World War II mates with the title of "The Greatest Generation."

Christopherson credited his military service with creating a lifelong impact. "I didn't go to high school, but I have an education in life," he said. "My 20 years in the service molded my way of life. I learned to take orders, do things on my own and take initiative. Those are things I never would have learned on the outside."

In the 2004 interview, Christopherson didn't have any pressing plans for his life after receiving his sheepskin. "I won't be going to college, and I don't think I will be applying for a job," he said with a chuckle.

Christopherson said he welcomed speaking invitations, particularly to counter inaccurate or incomplete stories about Pearl Harbor.

"It's important to hear our story, that we were able to listen to it, to see it on TV and read it in the papers," he said. "It's very important that we get the story out."

And now, with Christopherson's passing, one of those storytellers has fallen forever silent.

PULPIT REFLECTIONS

The pursuit of love should continue after marriage, too

By Pastor Devon Davoux
Cornerstone Church

Perhaps you have heard the phrase: "marriage" it's not a word but a sentence, a life sentence. Or "marriage is love. Love is blind." Therefore, marriage is an institution for the blind." Love is one long sweet dream, and marriage is the alarm clock.

Funny, but for too many that is their perspective on marriage. Hollywood and culture have reinforced this negative attitude towards marriage. I recently read that roughly 50 percent of marriages won't make it past 15 years. What if we hypothetically said you had a 50 percent chance of being mauled by a bear or getting into a car accident, wouldn't you think you would be a little more careful and proactive? Unfortunately there is a stigma when it comes to marriage enrichment or marriage counseling. There is a general defensiveness, "what are you saying we have a problem? We don't have a problem."

What area of your life can you neglect and expect it to get better? Whether it's our health, our finances, our lawn, neglect very seldom makes anything better. So

why would we expect our marriages to get better if we neglect them and live with the status quo?

Genesis 2:24 establishes God's plan for marriage "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and they will become one flesh." The word be united has the idea of pursuing hard with affection and devotion and continuing to give it.

How are you pursuing your spouse? The reality is we stop pursuing one another. We take for granted what we have and the years go by and we find ourselves barely able to talk to the one we fell madly in love with.

Let's be reminded that after the wedding we got to keep pursuing. Guys, one of the ways we keep pursuing is with words of affection. Specifically that is non-sexual affection. If you are not sure what that means it is affection that is non-sexual. If you are still confused, ask your wives. Ladies you can pursue your man with words of affirmation. Even though we appear confident, what we want to know is do you believe in us?

Let's do what we can to land on the good side of statistics by being proactive and continuing to pursue the one we love.

Johnson seeks summer and fall intern applicants

As students begin to plan for their summer and fall semesters, U.S. Sen. Tim Johnson (D-SD) is now accepting applications for summer and fall internship positions in his Washington, DC, Sioux Falls, Rapid City, and Aberdeen offices. Johnson is also accepting applications for internships with the Senate Banking Committee.

The Washington, DC, internship program matches interns' interests to South Dakota and federal issues and provides a firsthand opportunity to experience a wide-range of office duties.

Students may also apply to intern in the press shop for Johnson.

Internships in Johnson's state offices will provide students with in-depth knowledge of current issues affecting the state and the opportunity to work directly with South Dakotans. Johnson is chairman of the Senate Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs, and is accepting applications for internships in that Committee.

Additional information about committee internships is available at <http://banking.senate.gov>. College sophomores, juniors and seniors are encouraged to apply

for Johnson's summer and fall internship program. College credits or a stipend are available.

To apply for a state office internship, call toll-free at (800) 537-0025.

To apply for a Washington, D.C. internship, interested students should submit a cover letter, resume, references, and a writing sample to:

• General Internship, Sen. Tim Johnson, Attn: Intern Coordinator, 136 Hart SOB, Washington, DC 20510; by fax to: (202) 228-7575; by e-mail to: Intern_Coordinator@johnson.senate.gov

• Press Internship, Sen. Tim Johnson, Attn: Todd Deutsch, Press Intern Coordinator, 136 Hart SOB, Washington, DC 20510; by fax to: (202) 228-7575; by e-mail to: Todd_Deutsch@johnson.senate.gov

• For Banking Committee internships, graduate students and recent graduates are also encouraged to apply: Banking Committee Internship, Chairman Tim Johnson, Attn: Intern Coordinator, 534 Dirksen SOB, Washington, DC 20510; by fax to: (202) 224-5371; by e-mail to: internships_democratic@banking.senate.gov

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Trepidation

Dear Governor Dugaard and members of the South Dakota Legislature,

We are writing you today on behalf of the South Dakota Chapter of the American Choral Directors Association (SD-ACDA) to express our trepidation with the current education reform plan that has been proposed. While we agree with you that the teacher pay system needs to be re-evaluated, we have concerns with the bill that is currently being put forth. It is our view that this system will detrimentally impact all teachers in the South Dakota, but specifically those who educate in the arts.

The merit pay system, as it is currently proposed, would unfairly reward only those teachers in the "core subjects." Specialists, like music, art, and foreign language teachers, physical education instructors, librarians, and special education teachers have no standardized testing. If 50 percent of the merit pay evaluation system is based on quantitative data (test scores),

these teachers would find it difficult to qualify for bonuses despite the outstanding work they do with students in South Dakota. Additionally, this system would foster a work environment that is fraught with competition between instructors instead of one which instills collaboration to determine what is best for students.

Providing bonuses math and science teachers sends the wrong message to all other educators in the state. It says to them that while they are doing a great job leading our children, they are just not as important as some other teachers. These math and science instructors will do the same amount of work that all other teachers do, but get paid \$8000 more each year simply because of their field of study. As music teachers, many already feel underappreciated. Our classes often meet less, are disrupted, or our students removed for the benefit of the "core subjects."

A college graduate with a math degree can enter the work force with a starting salary exceeding \$45,000 a year with the potential

for six figure earnings, while the average starting salary for a teacher in South Dakota is less than \$27,000. The currently proposed bonus system would, after five years, force math and science teachers to take compensation reduction equal to about one quarter of their salary instead of seeing the gains in the private market. This does not encourage long term commitment to the teaching profession. Money is clearly not the draw.

In the current education plan, teacher tenure is also called into question. Tenure, or continuing contract, is not a right for teachers. It must be earned. What it does provide, is job security as the salary increases. It also establishes a system by which cause for dismissal must be established. Teachers throughout the state are non-renewed each year. What

removing tenure might do is allow school districts to balance tight budgets by eliminating excellent veteran teachers who earn more and replacing them with less costly beginning teachers.

As with all reform in education, a major component that must be adequately considered is consistent state funding. The proposal, as it stands now, calls for a substantial increase in state dollars to pay for the evaluation, bonuses, and increased standardized testing. The fear would be that this financial support would at some point be eliminated in a cost saving measure, as happened last year. If this became a reality, would school districts be required to continue to fund the program despite the loss in state aid? This could again cause crippling results to the school budgets and force another round of drastic program cuts.

The education system in South Dakota is not broken. What does need to be repaired is the status of teachers throughout the state and the morale of a defeated vocation. These professionals have been told by non-educators for years that they are not good enough both in words and actions through policy change, funding reductions, and rhetoric. Now is not the time to foster competition. It is not the time to create a

hierarchy of importance. It is not the time to further the environment that devalues the teaching profession. Instead, it is time to recognize these individuals for the heroes they truly are.

**Dr. David Holdhusen
and Mary Beth Kelly
co-presidents
South Dakota Chapter
American Choral
Directors Association**

CLAY COUNTY REPUBLICAN

NATIONAL CONVENTION DELEGATE SELECTION MEETING

All Clay County Republicans are invited to select national convention delegates at a special county caucus at 8 p.m. Thursday, March 1, 2012 at Vermillion Chamber of Commerce & Development Co. at 116 Market St. Vermillion, SD. If you are interested in attending the Republican National Convention in Tampa Bay, FL, in August, please be at this very important meeting.

For more information
please contact Clay County Republican Party
Chairman, Donna Schafer, at 605-624-4819.

CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS NEEDED

For Hearing/Auditory Processing Study

The USD Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders is seeking children ages 7-13 years and adults 18-25 years with no history of language, learning, or hearing problems to participate in a research study focused on updating normative values for diagnostic tests of Central Auditory Processing.

Participation will require two test sessions at the USD Speech-Language-Hearing Clinic in Vermillion. Each session will take approximately 1.5 to 2 hours and can be scheduled at your convenience (including evenings and weekends).

All participants will receive a free hearing test and central auditory processing evaluation. Participants also will be compensated for their participation.

To participate you must:

- Have no history of language, learning, or hearing problems.
- Have normal hearing
- Speak English as your primary language
- Be between 7-13 or 18-25 years of age

For more information, contact:

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