

TODAY'S WEATHER
Mostly Sunny
91° HI | 56° LO

SUNDAY
84° | 56°

MONDAY
86° | 57°

Recent Little League All-Stars win conjures memories of first team to take tourney championship See page 19

Bishop brother and sister graduate from University of San Diego See page 7



Portrait Art
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The Inyo Register

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Eastside mourns James Wilson

Entrepreneur, activist, community supporter dies at 67

By Darcy Ellis
 Managing Editor

The thoughtful and unassuming aren't generally known for making the history books, nor are they usually the ones whose exploits become legacy.

James Wilson is a notable exception - a man whose name may forever be synonymous with both Eastside recreation and conservation efforts, simply because he followed his passions, stuck to his principles and saw the wisdom in thinking ahead.

Thus it was a huge, collective loss and crushing blow when Wilson died Wednesday at Renown Hospital in Reno. He had suffered a stroke over the weekend and never regained consciousness. The longtime Bishop resident and former business owner leaves behind his beloved wife, Kay, daughter, Roseanne, son-in-law, Bay, and grandson, Ansel. He was 67.

At the time of his death, Wilson was a member of the Rotary Club of Bishop, where he was chairman of the International Service Committee; the Eastern Sierra chapter of the Audubon Society, which he helped found in 1983; and a board member of Friends of the Inyo, which he co-founded in 1986.

Wilson was a former longtime member of the California Wilderness Coalition and past member of the Bishop Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors.

Eulogies honoring Wilson and his contributions to the mountain sports culture, economy and environmental health of the Eastside are widespread in the wake of his death, and the grief being expressed is profound.

His passing comes not just as a shock to the close-knit Eastside community, but a punch in the gut; Wilson was a friend, mentor and role model to many who admire him for his honesty, loyalty, generosity, steadfastness, sly humor and grace.

"James was my brother in every sense of the word other than by blood," said decades' long friend and confidante Barbara Kelley, who also worked with Wilson on the Friends of the Inyo board. "He's everything good anyone can say about him."

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James Wilson (l), a co-founder of Friends of the Inyo, mingles with good friend Barbara Kelley and her husband Derrick Vocelka at the 2014 open house of FOI's offices on Barlow Lane in Bishop. In addition to being longtime friends, Wilson, Vocelka and Kelley helped form the Eastern Sierra Friends of Machik in 2005.

Photo by Mike Gervais

The Inyo Register
OPINION

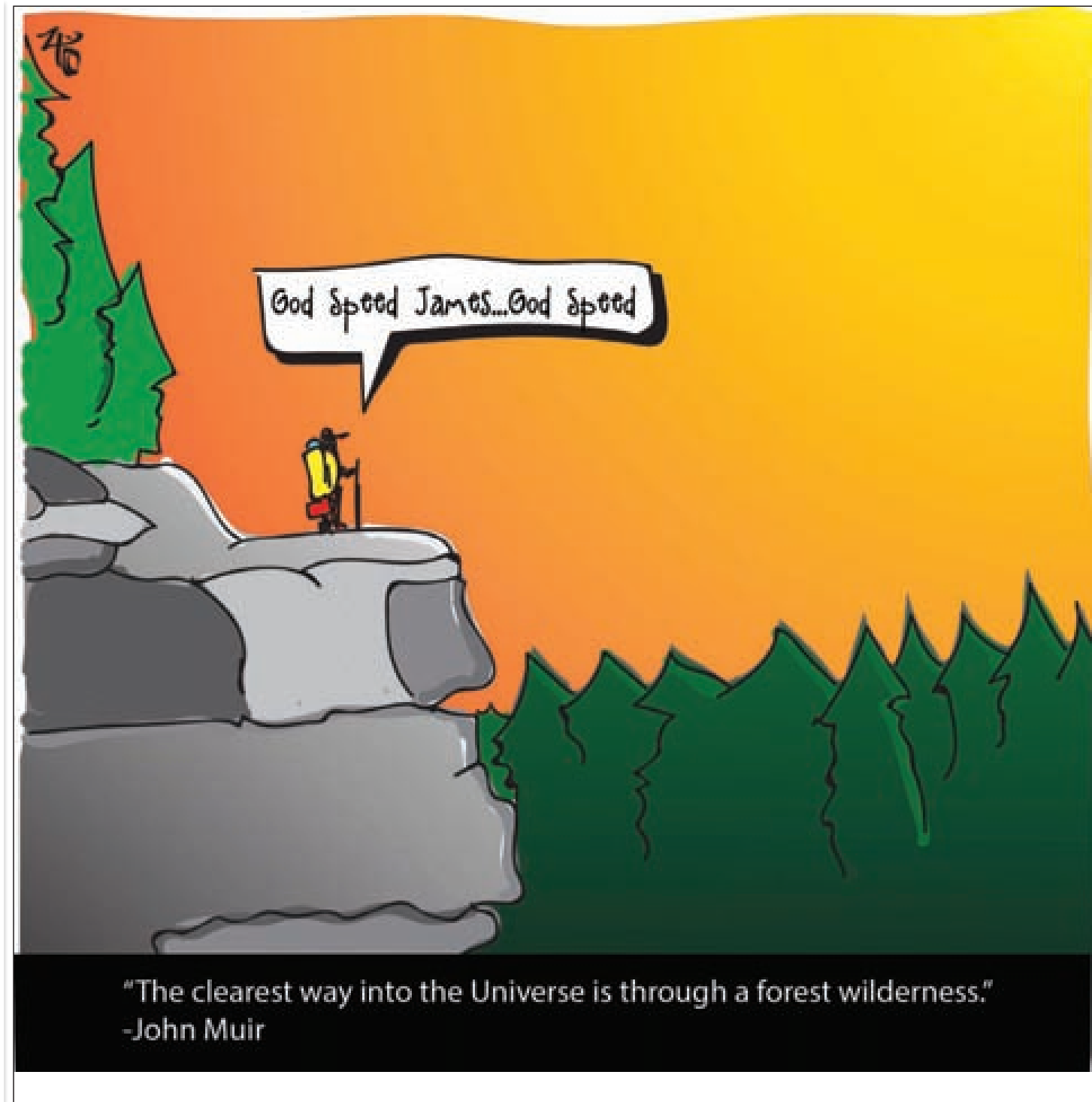
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RENA MLODECKI *Publisher* | DARCY ELLIS *Editor*

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WILSON

Continued from front page

One of the things being said is that, in his own understated way, Wilson made Bishop and the Eastern Sierra a better place to live and visit.

The Businessman

Wilson is known across the country, and globe, as long-time owner of Wilson's Eastside Sports on Main Street in Bishop, a mecca for enthusiasts of outdoor sports once considered on the fringe but which now dominate the scene, thanks in large part to the foresight of entrepreneurs like Wilson.

He started out in 1977 with partner Rick Wheeler and a boot repair shop they called Wheeler & Wilson. The store evolved over time to Wilson's Eastside Sports and the shoe repair portion was purchased in 1999 by Tony Puppo, whose Rubber Room endures to this day.

Wilson's was the first full-service sporting goods store in Bishop, and probably all of Inyo County, that didn't carry a single jar of fish bait - of which Wilson was both amused and proud, said Dave Patterson, executive director of the Bishop Chamber of Commerce in the early 2000s. Instead, Wilson's catered to a different clientele, men and women following their wanderlust into the great outdoors to hike, bike, run, walk, climb and explore.

"James always called it self-propelled recreation," close friend and fellow Friends of the Inyo co-founder Mike Prather said.

According to Prather, Wilson blazed the trail locally for businesses devoted to this type of recreation, and he did it at a time when hikers and backpackers were disparaged as "treehuggers" and "dirty hippies" by a very rural, very conservative community, instead of respected as any other coffer-contributing tourist.

But Wilson, running a successful business that drew visitors to the area, demanded the respect of his peers and he got it, Prather said.

"James was a tremendous business man and he worked incredibly hard," he said. During the early 2000s he was elected to the Chamber Board of Directors, and Patterson tried to get him to serve as president. Wilson declined but was able to help represent a growing segment of the Bishop population and its business interests along with the rest of the community.

"When he was on the Chamber board he was not one of those people that had an agenda," Patterson said. "A lot of us make decisions based on self-interest a lot of the time but he seemed to have a broad perspective of this town and his role in it."

In general, he is credited with doing for the city and sports like bouldering what Wave Rave did for Mammoth Lakes and snowboarding.

"Bouldering is a significant recreational product here and it was James who put it on the map," Patterson said. "A lot of it had to do with the way people were received in his store."

He sold Wilson's to long-time friend and employee Chris Iverson and her husband, Todd Vogel, in 2012.

On the business' website, the couple notes they are "slowly dropping the use of 'Wilson's' and continuing to use the 'Eastside Sports.' Some will always know the store as 'Wilson's,' and that's OK with us."

The Activist

Prather first met Wilson in the early 1980s. The men shared similar interests, like hiking, birding and saving the planet. It was around the time the Inyo National Forest was drafting its Forest Plan. Age-old concerns about conservation, access and habitat inspired, Prather, Wilson, Frank Stewart and other residents to form Friends of the Inyo. Wilson remained a board member from Day 1, helping to guide the grassroots organization as it evolved from the ad hoc phase to requiring an actual office and staff.

"He served as president for eight years, having held most roles on the executive committee," said current President Sydney Quinn. "James was active on the board for nearly three decades! His dedication and passion for the Eastern Sierra will be missed by few."

"The passing of James into the ether has been a shock and loss to all of us at Friends of the Inyo," Quinn continued.

"He was an incomparable colleague, mentor, leader, sometimes father figure and above all the ultimate local champion for all things wild on the Eastside. Our family of staff and board is small and close. James' absence leaves a gaping crevasse in our hearts as well as our leadership. Our lives at FOI will, of course, go on but all of us as well as our members and supporters will miss him in ways yet unknown."

As a member of both Friends of the Inyo and the California Wilderness Coalition, Wilson advocated for and helped pass legislation for additional wilderness in the Eastern Sierra in 2002.

"This is a huge loss to Eastside activism for the environment," climber and author Doug Robinson wrote Thursday on the supertopo.com climbing forum. "I have always felt humbled and inspired by how active and engaged - and downright effective! - James Wilson was at pouring his entire life into strengthening the hold that the remaining wild places have on our overcivilized planet."

Wilson also spent 10 years on an effort that resulted in the first desert preservation bill, the California Desert Protection Act of 1994 that expanded Death Valley National Park.

Just last year, Wilson was among the prominent citizens who spoke out against the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power's proposed solar ranch east of Manzanar National Historic Site.

This past June, he wrote a letter to the editor in which he encouraged residents to attend an open house hosted by the Forest Service to update the public on a mandated effort it has undertaken to inventory possible additions to wilderness areas.

He wrote: "As California continues down the path of rampant population growth and sprawling, increasingly complete development across our landscapes, the wild lands of the Eastern Sierra become more and more valuable; to our local economy, for visitors seeking places that are unpaved and quiet, and to our collective souls, which need unspoiled and peaceful places to recreate and restore ourselves. And wild unroaded country is priceless for our wildlife, water and cultural resources. Quite frankly whether you are a fisherman, hunter, hiker, birdwatcher, the blank spot on the map is priceless."

The Voice of Reason

Wilson's June 6 letter offers a glimpse of the type of even-handed communication he was known for during times of conflict and controversy.

"James was passionate about defending wild places. He had a knack for uncomplicating complicated issues concerning protecting places, referring sometimes to 'critters and places' rather than 'species and habitat,'" Vogel said. "Though he was passionate about protecting and defending wildlands he was almost as equally passionate about working with opposing viewpoints to reach common understanding if not agreement."

A regular at public meetings where the topic of discussion was the environment and potential harm thereof, Wilson was never one to grandstand, raise his voice or derail the conversation. He was an effective communicator who calmly stated his case and said his peace - a habit that gave him the reputation of being a voice of reason, even as he stood by his own beliefs.

"James was a stillwater person - he was a very passionate person - (but in public) he was very calm and focused and always looking for ways to keep people in the room and work on things that were very challenging," Prather said.

Doug Thompson, owner of Whitney Portal Store in Lone Pine, remembers working with Wilson to form a "No-Name Committee" many years ago in an effort to secure a land transfer from federal agencies for the public good. It meant working with and alongside people whose interests and views were out of line with their own. Yet, Wilson was able to keep talks going when it appeared the experiment was about to fail.

"Near the bitter end of the second meeting I could see no



The Collaborative Action Team, comprised of concerned citizens and representatives of several community groups and the Board of Supervisors, developed Alternative 6 of the Travel Management Plan, which the U.S. Forest Service modified and adopted back in



James Wilson behind the counter of world famous Wilson's Eastside Sports, the first full-service sporting goods store in the Eastern Sierra that catered to hikers, climbers and runners.

File photo



Wilson showing a silly side over some dumplings in Taipei with his wife, Kay, and good friends Mike and Nancy Prather during a 2014 birding trip to Thailand.

Photo courtesy Mike Prather

give from either or all sides - the silo walls were built and snugly secured," Thompson said. "James said, 'I think we should try one more meeting.' I truly admired James for his ability to if not agree then listen and if possible take the middle ground."

Thompson and Wilson worked on a similar effort with the Inyo National Forest's 2009 Travel Management Plan, which designated a system of roads and trails for motorized vehicle use. To expedite the process and reduce friction among various stakeholders, the Forest Service formed the first-ever Collaborative Action Team, a collection of outdoor enthusiasts, motorized access advocates, businesspeople, elected officials and others tasked with making a recommendation to the forest supervisor.

Together, the parties were able to come up with a recommendation resulting in a decision that, while, displeasing to some, was widely lauded as an example of cooperative groundwork.

"That diverse group shaking hands and signing off on it - that was a huge accomplishment," Prather said. "James was a major player in that."

Today, the Collaborative Action Team is viewed as a model across the country for forest planning efforts.

Many of the same parties involved in the collaborative action team actually found themselves on the opposite sides of another issue recently when the Inyo County Board of Supervisors was asked to consider approving the ATV pilot project known as Adventure Trails.

Patterson recalls how at one meeting Wilson spoke against the project and he spoke for it, yet in the next issue of the newspaper was a photo of them at the meeting with their arms around each other's shoulders, smiling.

"I'm not the only person who had that kind of relationship with him," Patterson

said.

Randy Van Tassell, who first became acquainted with Wilson as his accountant in the 1980s and over the years grew to become one of his best friends, was often at political odds with Wilson.

"He was very aware of what was going on politically and socially in the community," Van Tassell said. "He and I had 180 views but we could always discuss things honestly and openly and could work together even though we were coming from different viewpoints."

When the Board of Supervisors did approve the Adventure Trails pilot project in January, James was asked for his reaction and responded from a gracious perspective: "I'm pleased with the deliberation. Whether I'm happy with the decision ... eh. (But) it's an opportunity for the OHV crowd to prove they're responsible."

The Philanthropist

For some, Wilson is best known as the man introducing the Banff Mountain Film Festival each night of its world-tour stop in Bishop. But more accurately, he's the reason the tour stops in Bishop, since he and his wife have been funding the screenings for the past 22 years.

Wilson and Brad Rassler, a friend and fellow outdoor enthusiast, organized the first festival in 1995 thinking maybe 100 people would show up; instead, nearly 300 people packed themselves in for the viewing. To date, more than 20,000 residents and visitors have attended the local Banff tour in its 22-year local run.

Since that very first year, Wilson has given Banff proceeds to the Inyo Council for the Arts in order to support the Millpond Music Festival, which was near and dear to Wilson's heart.

"He used to come in every year and I'd show him YouTube videos of all the bands we'd booked and it was fun to watch him get excited,"

said ICA Executive Director Lynn Cooper.

Wilson's contributions to the ICA total upwards of \$100,000, but according to Cooper, his faith in the Millpond Music Festival was invaluable.

It's impossible to calculate how much Wilson and his wife contributed to various other organizations, charities and fundraisers over the years.

"James loved the Eastern Sierra and did anything he could to help promote or support organizations in the Eastern Sierra or activities in the Eastern Sierra," Van Tassell said.

Much of his philanthropic efforts were through Wilson's Eastside Sports and Eastside Sports, Inc., but for the past 15 years or so, Wilson has also been serving the community with the Rotary Club of Bishop.

This community service, according to Van Tassell, who brought Wilson aboard, has ranged from handing out deserts to students being honored at the high school to serving lunch at the local soup kitchen each week.

But his passion and primary focus in Rotary were the international projects, such as helping to establish schools in Tibet, sending books to and making water available in villages in Africa and, most recently, sending the Mammoth Medical Missions team to Chiapis, Mexico to train nurses and midwives.

Van Tassell, Ramona Delmas and Tom Hardy joined Wilson on a needs assessment trip in December that preceded an effort to raise \$70,000 to send 29 physicians, who spent two weeks in Chiapis in May.

"He was very proud of his part in that and justifiably so," Van Tassell said.

Wilson's international charity efforts extended to the mountains of Tibet, where schoolchildren benefited from money he and other residents have raised on their behalf.

"James has been instrumental in a small group called Eastern Sierra Friends of Machik. He helped form the group after I came back in 2005 from teaching English at a school in Chungba, a remote village in the mountains of eastern Tibet," said his good friend Kelley. "He has helped raise money for the school for 10 years. The money goes to the nonprofit Machik (machik.org) in Washington, D.C., and then directly to support the school and students in Chungba."

The Retiree

When not trying to save the world with friends like Prather, Van Tassell and Kelley, Wilson spent a lot of time in retirement hiking and birdwatching in some of the very landscape he personally helped to preserve for posterity.

"He just loved being outdoors, climbing, skiing, road bicycling and especially birding," Vogel said. "Birding with him sometimes was like going to Disneyland with a small child. We'd see some cool bird and he'd start going off 'Oh, oh, oh, oh my god it's a Caspian Tern!' 'Oh oh oh! Todd! Todd! Get on this bird I think it's a Barrow's Goldeneye!'"

According to Van Tassell, Wilson's log book of sighted birds numbered into the thousands.

This past year he and Kay took a birding trip to Tierra

del Fuego and last year traveled with Michael and Nancy Prather to Thailand.

When not birding, he was either gardening - trying to grow that perfect melon or tomato, Prather said - or hiking with Kay.

"He could name the peaks from Lone Pine to Lee Vining and could tell you their height - and he probably climbed most of them," Van Tassell said. "And there probably is not a trail in Inyo or Mono counties that he and Kay have not utilized."

According to Van Tassell, what Wilson looked forward to most was being able to watch grandson Ansel grow up, which is what makes his death a true tragedy.

"He was ecstatic about his new grandchild," Van Tassell said.

The Friend

For all his many qualities and contributions, in the end, Wilson is being remembered as a true friend to a lot of people whose hearts are broken.

"He had so many friends, he was such an amazing person," Prather said. "He was such a rich person intellectually. It was to great to be around him, you could talk to him about anything."

Wilson also had a sense of humor that was as "dry as the desert," he said.

"... I always loved his playful, wry and subtle sense of humor," Robinson wrote on supertopo.com. "Sometimes you'd only be alerted to look for the joke by the way he'd crack half a smile followed by just the shred of a chuckle."

"He was a good person," Patterson said.

Part of that meant Wilson was willing to go above and beyond, especially for those he loved.

"I remember - I think it was his 40th birthday or thereabouts," Vogel said. "I had to climb the East Buttress of Mt. Whitney, which I had never done before but had to guide the next week. Somehow I convinced James that he and I should go do it in a day, car to car. We did it but at his birthday party neither of us could walk down stairs because our legs were so sore."

More stories and memories like Vogel's can be found at <http://james-kepler-wilson.forevermissed.com/>, where friends and acquaintances are also welcome to leave condolences.

Aside from an incredible legacy, Wilson leaves behind his many words, in letters both public and personal, in impassioned comments to legislators and federal agencies, and various essays, including one he wrote on the history and mission of Friends of the Inyo, first appearing in the *Jeffrey Pine Journal* summer 2011 edition.

In it, Wilson writes what could very well sum up his wishes for friends and strangers alike:

"(Exploration) is the greatest joy. Get out there, go see it. Get your socks dirty, and take someone new with you, take someone young ... If possible this summer introduce someone else to the wonders of the natural world. Inoculate them with the wild. Go walk, bird, backpack, do something with them outdoors ..."

"Give something back to the places that you love ... spend time cleaning or restoring a place you cherish. And, of course, take someone new with you!"

File photo