

Dad would have been 100 this week



BY JEFF VONKAENEL / jeffv@newsreview.com

This week, my dad, William Edward vonKaenel, would have turned 100. During his 52 years on this planet, he experienced the Roaring Twenties, the Great Depression, World War II and the GI Bill, became a doctor and moved from Ohio to California with six kids in a station wagon in 1964.

Although it has been 48 years since he died, he has been in my thoughts over the last several months.

It is easy to be overwhelmed with COVID-19, President Donald Trump, political polarization, climate change and numerous other problems. Then I think about my dad's life. He lost his father at a very young age. Turning nine years old at the beginning of the Depression, he and three siblings and his widowed mom had to scrape by, often not knowing where their next meal would come from. That experience taught him the importance of thrift and family.

Serving in the Army and going to college and medical school on the GI Bill made a deep impression on my dad. He believed we were all connected and dependent upon each other. He appreciated that taxpayers enabled him to go to college. During the Depression, he had been accepted at Stanford, but was unable to go because he had to stay home to help support his family. So instead, he worked in the steel mills in Lorain, Ohio.

During my high school and college days, my dad and I had heated political arguments about civil rights and the Vietnam War. He understandably saw the government as the institution that helped his family during the Depression, enabled him to become a doctor and won World War II. I saw the government as an institution conducting an unjust immoral war in Vietnam and preventing blacks from voting or having justice.

I loved and respected my dad. He called me one night to tell me that he did not want me to join fellow UC Santa Barbara students in protesting the Vietnam War.



PHOTO BY JEAN VONKAENEL

After a pause, he gave me an attorney's name in Santa Barbara, just in case something happened.

My love and appreciation for dad grew at that moment. He made it clear he loved me for doing what I believed in, even when he didn't agree with me. And dad's views about the government did change over time.

Today, remembering my dad's life experiences gives me hope. In 1932, when the country was in a severe depression, we elected a new Congress and a new president who called for massive reforms. The New Deal included Social Security, jobs programs, union protections, higher taxes on the rich, environmental programs and more.

We did it once and we can do it again. We can roll back the tax breaks for the rich and corporations and use those resources to fix America. We can have a real discussion about race and enact policies that bring about equality. We can reform our criminal justice system. We can save our planet. We can be that America that helped a poor Ohio blue-collar worker go to college and become a doctor, a doctor who told his son over and over again that there is more to life than making a buck. You have to do something with your life to make a difference.

Dad, you did not need to tell me. I was watching you. □

Jeff vonKaenel is the president, CEO and majority owner of the News & Review.

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