

The Biography of Joseph Arthur Fisher



Joe Fisher was a man who distinguished himself by hard work in all the facets of his life. His love of quality work showed in his hobbies: trains and the filming of trains. It also manifested itself in his commitment to raise his family well and instill the ways of the Christian faith in them. Most of all, however, Joe's resolution to do a good job showed in his love of carpentry and working with his hands. In all these fields, Joe showed a patience and skill with the work he was entrusted to do.

Joseph Arthur Fisher was born on September 18th, 1929 in Burlington, Vermont to Arthur Fisher and Marie Bourassa. He was the oldest child in a family of 14 brothers and sisters, with 4 brothers and 9 sisters. Between the youngest and oldest children there was a 19 year age difference.

At an early age, Joe's love of doing a good job was beginning to show. In such a large family, Joe, as the eldest, had the most responsibility. Joe kept the Fisher house on Decatur Street in the North end of Burlington looking nice by devoting his time to keeping it clean. "He would always have a job for everyone," says one of Joe's sisters. Joe's younger brother, John, also recounts how he and his older brother would spend days meticulously building a wooden model glider. This was one instance, however, where Joe's hard work did not pay off. At the end of several days of work, Joe celebrated the construction of his airplane by lighting it on fire and letting it fly off the back porch! "There was only one flight," says John. Joe's love for working with his hands was also beginning to surface in his early years. His siblings describe how he would often take apart household items to see how they worked on the inside. Joe's interest in trains was also taking shape; he would often play with the Lionel train set that the Fisher family kept in the basement.

Joe attended elementary school at Nazareth School, now St. Joseph's, around the corner, a couple blocks from his house. Joe's first priority in school was doing well, to set a good example for his numerous siblings. Joe spent as much time as he needed to finish his homework before going out to play with his best friends at Nazareth; Ben Robear, his neighbor, and Paul Fisher, his cousin. His younger siblings remember how Joe would often do his homework with them at the kitchen table after school.

Joe was an active boy, involved in many clubs and organizations that his school and neighborhood offered. He was an altar boy at St. Joseph's Church and was also an avid member of the Boy Scouts. Joe's sisters recall how Joe would frequently hold scout meetings at his house. "He would never let anyone in the cellar," says Joe's sister "Babe" Fisher, "there would be a sign on the door that said 'No Girls Allowed.'" Joe's life at home was also an interesting one during his school years. His sisters say he would get up in the morning and cook his breakfast of fried eggs in maple syrup. His brother John also remembers how, when Joe got his first car, he let John drive it. "I backed it right through a fence," says John. "There were great big scratch marks all up the trunk. He wasn't very happy about that."

When he graduated from eighth grade, Joe reached an important decision in his life. He came from a French-Canadian family that was rich in traditions. Already, Joe was the recipient of one of those traditions: the naming of the firstborn son after his grandfather, either Joseph Arthur Fisher or Arthur Joseph Fisher. I am named for my grandfather, Joe; my father is named Arthur for his grandfather. This tradition continues to this day.

The tradition that Joe faced now regarded the Catholic priesthood. For years, it had been an unwritten rule in the family that the oldest son and daughter would become a priest and a nun. Following these expectations, Joe enrolled in the seminary at Notre Dame University in Indiana and began his religious studies. He was only 14 years old, the equivalent of a high school freshman. For two semesters, Joe learned the history and theology of the Catholic Church and studied Latin. However, after a while, he began to get homesick. Joe dropped out of the seminary and returned to Vermont.

When he came back, Joe attended Cathedral High School, now called Rice. During his time at Cathedral, Joe strayed away from any of the schools more popular organized sports. He did, however, join the cheerleading squad, which was at that time an all-male activity that was considered a sport. Joe also participated in Stunt Nite, which was probably the only time he engaged in the arts. Joe got his first job during his high school career. He worked at Verrets grocery store on Church Street. His love of hard work shown through clearly in his employment. His brothers and sisters tell how he would often bring work home to his family. His continuation of work outside the workplace tells its own story of how Joe was so dedicated to getting the job done that he would sacrifice his own free time to see it finished.

Joe also worked at Verrets for another reason: the social climate. Working at a grocery store allowed him to meet people, something he loved to do. "He [Joe] liked to work , he liked to talk to people," says one of his sisters. Joe's brother John also agrees. "He liked to work because it helped him meet people," he says. Joe's love of working and his personable attitude would influence his career choices throughout his life.

When he finished high school in 1949, Joe enrolled in the US Navy. He trained at Great Lakes and was eventually stationed at Pensacola, Florida. He served there for four years as the storekeeper. Once again, his love of being with people surfaced in his choice of a job that allowed him the most social contact.

When he returned to Vermont, Joe attended the Burlington Business College. Joe worked diligently but never finished his studies because they were interrupted by his father's untimely death at age 47. Joe, who was only 22 at the time, had to become the leader of the family, helping his mother raise the other 13 children, the youngest of whom was only three.

His father's death emotionally hardened Joe somewhat. Forced to be the head of the family, he tried to set a good example as a strong leader. As a result, Joe began to withhold his emotions so as not to show weakness. This tendency by no means reduced his sociability to outsiders, but it made him somewhat removed from those that he was closest to. However, he still found time to let them know that he cared about them.

Two years later, in 1953, Joe followed his father in a career at the National Biscuit Company , which became the Millbrook Bread Company. Joe's father had been general manager of the National Biscuit Company, the distribution company for northern Vermont and New Hampshire. Joe started as a bread delivery man and stayed in the sales business for his entire 14 year career with the bread company, eventually rising to the position of route supervisor.

During this time of his life, Joe met Marguerite “Peg” Carvey. She was also from a large, family, although she was the youngest of 8. They were married in Our Lady of Seven Dolours Church in Fair Haven on August 14th, 1954. Together, they had four children: Arthur (Jay), Deborah, Laurie, and Kim. All but one of these children are living today; Debbie died in 1967 from pneumonia combined with spinal muscular atrophy.

Debbie’s disease affected both Joe and his family in many ways. Since it prohibited her from walking, she could not go with them on long, social outings. Joe was especially close to Debbie. His daughter Kim remembers how he would slide down a slide with her so she could experience what it felt like to slide. She also remembers how Joe carried Debbie all the way up Mount Mansfield, since she could not do it herself. Debbie’s death at the age of 10 two weeks before Christmas, therefore, affected Joe and his wife profoundly. “It obviously had a great affect on all of us,” says Kim, but it touched Joe and Peg the most. Kim remembers that after Debbie’s death, Joe was not vocally expressive about it. It is possible that because of having to deal with his father’s death earlier in his life, the death of one of his own children caused him to reserve his feelings for his other children, for fear of losing them. Joe’s strong Catholic faith also undoubtedly helped him to cope with Debbie’s death.

Following Debbie’s death, Joe left the bread company after 14 years of service. He joined the Prudential Insurance Company where he would work for 25 years until his retirement in 1991. Joe sold insurance with Prudential all across the state of Vermont. Joe believed in personal service and honest dealings. With his change of careers, Joe’s love of being with people showed through, even in the drastic change of going from bread delivery to insurance sales. Joe did not choose a job where he would be at a desk all day; he chose a job where he could go out and meet people. Debbie’s death, unfortunate as it was, allowed the Fisher family more time to take vacations and go on outings farther away from home. Without having to care for Debbie’s disability, Joe could afford more time to go hiking and do other activities with his wife and children. Joe took his family to Washington DC, New York City, Boston, and many other places in and around Vermont. Kim also recalls how Joe would take the family to the airport every Sunday after Mass to look at airplanes. Joe’s interest in trains was not as strong as it would be in later years. At this time of his life, his interest in flight overshadowed the hobby of his childhood.

Joe passed on his religious faith to his children, acting as a good Christian father should. His children remember how they would go to Mass faithfully every Sunday. Joe also sent all of his children to Catholic schools, just as he had done. Over their school years, Joe’s children attended St. Anthony’s, Christ the King, and Rice. Joe was also active in his church community in the social ways he enjoyed. He founded the St. Anthony’s folk group that continues to sing at Mass every Saturday, and helped to start the coffee and donut social after Mass.

In 1991, Joe decided that the time had come for him to retire. He left the Prudential after 25 years of devoted service. Over the final six months of his career, his son Jay also worked selling insurance there. After his retirement, Joe spent what his daughter Laurie calls “the happiest years of his life” doing odd jobs and spending time with his family and hobbies. It was during his retirement that Joe’s love of working with his hands blossomed again. He did small construction work with several of the friends that he had made throughout his life. In virtually every house on his street, there was one part of it that he had helped build or repair. On most of these jobs, Joe refused payment, preferring to do business through a handshake. He also videotaped the entire construction of the Southern Connector project that was taking place behind his son’s house.

Although Joe left the work scene, he still kept the friends that he had made. He would often eat breakfast at Handy’s Lunch in Burlington, and became well known with the patrons and owners alike. He could also be found at Rockwood’s Deli, where he would order their “Michigans” with everything on it.

Joe never fully retired. Even after he left Prudential, he continued to run his own small company; Champlain Valley Pools. He would travel around the Burlington area, selling and personally installing pools. Joe would often make rounds around Burlington, Shelburne, and other surrounding counties to monitor and service pools. This job helped “the Pool Man” to stay connected with the friends that he had made, and allowed him to meet new people, showing his love of a job that allowed social contact. Joe’s value for hard work also showed in his diligence and devotion to his customers; he would make his rounds every Tuesday and Thursday, rain or shine, every summer. Joe serviced pools up until his death in 2001. In his last summer, Joe also employed his grandson to help him clean the pools.

It was also during his retired years that Joe’s love for trains resurfaced. One Christmas, Joe’s wife, Peg had presented him with an HO gauge train set. This model railroad re-ignited the interest of his childhood, and he began to do everything that he could that involved trains. He constructed a massive layout that took up half his basement and was a testament to his hard, and meticulous work. It contained hundreds of cars and engines, as well as many miniature buildings and trees. Everyone from his grandchildren to his friends were impressed with his work. His grandchildren would often come over to play with the trains and would stay for hours mesmerized by the seemingly endless lengths of track. Joe took his grandchildren to train shows, where both the young and old Fishers were amazed at others model railroad achievements. Joe’s interest in trains extended beyond his basement however. He began to “chase” trains, following them and filming hours of video of them. Joe also got involved in the Lamoille Valley Railroad as a conductor, and filmed much of his footage there. The company allowed him to film from both inside and outside the trains, giving him shots from the cab, the cars, and also letting him shoot in places where average passengers would not be allowed. Joe’s fascination with trains prompted his wife to buy a bumper sticker reading “Pray for me, my husband chases trains.”

When the Lamoille Valley Railroad closed, Joe turned his train interests closer to home. He didn’t have to look far; a little more than a mile from his house was the Vermont Railway’s Burlington rail yard. From then on, he could be found all around the state, videotaping the Vermont Railway’s movements. Joe became an employee of the Vermont Railway when he landed a conductor’s job on the Sugarbush Railway, the Vermont Railway’s passenger train. He also joined Operation Lifesaver, a program dedicated to preventing deaths by railway accidents. He would often go to schools to talk to children about safety around trains and train tracks. When the Sugarbush Railway stopped running, Joe continued to be involved with the Vermont Railroad. He made friends with the engineers and rail yard employees, who allowed him free access to the yard to film or look at the trains. When the new commuter train, the “Champlain Flyer”, was unveiled, Joe immediately took up position as the conductor. He made friends with the director of the project and handled the cash operations. Joe’s legacy as a railroad buff would continue even after his death.

Joe’s years of retirement were not wholly spent with trains. He also spent many happy hours with his family, which by now included grandchildren Joseph and James Fisher, and Emily and Katie Dykes. Every year the family would celebrate Thanksgiving and Christmas together, the latter being a joyous gathering at Joe’s house, with heaps of presents and train ornaments on the tree. Joe also enjoyed taking his grandchildren for various outings, such as one to Mount Washington and another to a famous New Hampshire railroad. Joe’s love of his family and being with people were some of the dominant factors of his retired life.

During the late summer of 2001, Joe began to feel unnaturally tired. Thinking that he had just worked hard that summer, he settled down to take some rest. However, the problem did not go away, if anything, it got worse. As time went by, he began to lose muscle strength and was unable to walk correctly. He eventually decided that it was worth a visit to the doctor's. Joe went to the hospital in the beginning of September to see what was happening to him. He stayed, however, only long enough for the doctors to take some tests. He was at home for the news of the September 11th terrorist attacks. One week later, Joe had some bigger news to deal with. On September 18th, his birthday, Joe received an unwelcome gift; he found out that he was sick with stomach cancer and dermatomyositis, an accompanying muscle condition

The disease quickly rendered him immobile. He was confined to a bed in the hospital where his wife and children were with him nearly the whole time. Joe's illness was felt by the whole community. His neighbors visited his wife to comfort her, and in church, they prayed for both her and Joe. Joe returned home from the hospital in November, but it was not because he was feeling better, Joe knew that he was nearing the end of his life, and wanted to live his last days in the place he loved and with the people who loved him. Joe's struggle with his disease ended on November 8th, around 11 o'clock at night, when he died peacefully in his sleep with his son Jay at his side.

As news of Joe's death spread, the hundreds of people whom he had touched flocked to Burlington to see him for one last time. His wake at Ready Funeral Home on Shelburne Road lasted from four in the afternoon until nine o'clock at night, and over those five hours, nearly 600 people filed past his casket. Some waited for nearly an hour in a line that reached out of the building to see Joe for the last time. These crowds are a clear testament to the number of lives that Joe touched. "Joe's biggest asset was his friendliness," says his brother John, and the crowds that flocked to the funeral home are a lasting tribute to his personality.

Joe's funeral was held on November 11th, at St. Anthony's Church, where once again, a large crowd came to pay their last respects and offer up their prayers for Joe. As the mourners exited the church for the burial, they could hear the sound of a train blowing its horn. Joe's relatives had arranged for the railway to do this as a last tribute to Joe's favorite hobby. He was buried alongside his daughter Debbie in Resurrection Park in South Burlington. Joe's funeral and wake remain the biggest reminders as to just how many lives he touched. The crowds that flocked to his funeral show how one man helped improve the world. When patrons of another wake saw the hordes of people coming to see Joe, they asked, "Who was this Joe Fisher?"

Who was this Joe Fisher? He was many things. He was a father, and brother, a son, a role model, a student, a cheerleader, a bread deliverer, a friend, a navy officer, a store clerk, a husband, a seminarian, a grandfather, and an insurance salesman. He was a sportsman, a water-skier, a hiker, a carpenter, a photographer, and altar boy, and a singer. He was a religious man, a conductor, a runner, a train buff, a "grandpa," a "bunka", and a "pool man." But most of all, Joseph Arthur Fisher was a good man who loved being with people and loved seeing a job done right.

Written by grandson Joe Fisher on 2 December 2003 for Honors English 10 - Ms. Velez