

Kenneth Alan Bonnem, 89

passed away at his Oregon home on August 30, 2025. He was born April 18, 1936, in Chicago, Illinois to Lillian (Lil) Prussak and Joseph Bonnem.

Ken had an idyllic “free range” childhood living on the Northside of Chicago and at Camp Lake, Wisconsin where his parents had a summer home. His lifelong passions for music, exploring, adventure and long-distance bicycling were always part of his enjoyment in life.

He grew up near the shore of Lake Michigan and his mom often took him to the Audubon sanctuary in nearby Lincoln Park where he learned the names of all the birds when he was only 6 years old.

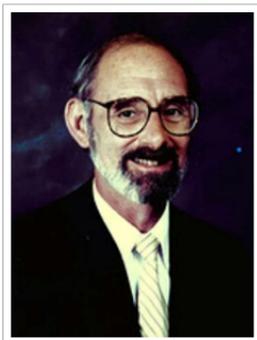
Ken’s Mom Lil was a well-known pianist at Chicago’s WGN radio station and Ken and his brother Don grew up exposed to great musicians in Chicago by visiting jazz clubs with their parents.

As a young child Ken took the bus on his own to accordion lessons at the WGN radio station in downtown Chicago. Ken learned to play the accordion there from legendary Sammy Porfario but later changed to the clarinet.

During WWII, Ken, his mom, and brother Don lived at their summer home in Camp Lake, Wisconsin while his dad commuted to his business in Chicago. While there, Ken went to a one room schoolhouse with one teacher teaching thirteen students in eight grades.

When Ken was fifteen, he and a friend bicycled by themselves from Chicago to Wautoma, Wisconsin, 150 miles each way, to visit his Grandmother Helen and camped at night in fields along the way. That sense of adventure stayed with Ken his entire life.

High school was at the prestigious Lane Tech in Chicago, a music



performance high school where he majored in music and played in the band and orchestra. To be able to afford to go to college, he auditioned and was accepted by the 5th US Army Band which toured the Mid-West and later was assigned to the 438th US Army Band and the 7th Infantry Division US Army Band in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

On Ken's first day in Colorado Springs, he looked up at Pike's Peak (14,000 feet high), saw there was a road that went to the top and drove his 1950 Dodge sedan almost to the top before the engine gave out from the altitude! Luckily, he was rescued before nightfall by a state police officer who helped him turn his car around to descend.

After his Army service he began college at the University of Illinois at the Champaign/Urbana campus. He earned living expenses by playing nightly gigs with the Dick Hallaman Dance Band. Summers during his college years were spent at the band's summer residence at an Indiana Beach, Illinois resort where Ken was a lifeguard during the day and played saxophone, clarinet, and string bass in the band each evening.

Ken was a member of the Alpha Chi Rho fraternity. During the school year he was the University of Illinois' "Daily Illini" newspaper "Campus Scout" columnist and reviewer for all the music events on campus.

After graduating with a BA in communications in 1962, Ken married Linda Carl and moved to Rockford, Illinois. He began work as news director for television station WTVO. During that time, he got the last "one on one" interview with George Lincoln Rockwell (viewable on YouTube) who was running for President on the American Nazi Party platform and who was assassinated not long after the interview. Because the WTVO station manager refused to air the interview of the controversial candidate, Ken quit.

Ken then became the Assistant to the School Superintendent of the Rockford School District and engineered several successful school budget campaigns. However, after mandatory school integration was required by the Federal government, the school board, unhappy with

that mandate, fired Ken and the superintendent in protest.

Through his connections as an officer with the National School Public Relations Association, Ken learned of an opportunity to join the Salem-Keizer School District as assistant to the superintendent. He and Linda and their three small children (Jane, Kenneth Carl (KC) and Joseph Edward (Jed)) moved to Salem, OR in 1970.

During his time with the Salem-Keizer School District he developed the Local School Advisory Committees (LSACs) that every elementary, junior high and high school had and regularly attended twenty plus meetings per month.

In 1972, he was hired by Governor McCall. Bob Logan, Governor McCall's Assistant for Intergovernmental Relations, hired Ken to be the executive director of the newly created land use information service called "Feedback". This new organization was part of the statewide public effort to establish strong land use planning legislation. The outcome was passage of Oregon's landmark land use law SB100.

In 1973, Ken helped create and was the chair of the South Central Association of Neighbors (SCAN) working on many land use issues including allowing commercial zoning for former homes on Liberty and Commercial Streets SE, many of which were becoming vacant, to become small business offices and successfully stabilized that area. He also worked to save Baker Elementary School.

In 1975, Ken became the Community Relations Officer in Public Affairs for the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT). During those years, Ken traveled extensively with the Oregon Transportation Commission and visited every town in every part of Oregon. In his free time, he explored every paved and unpaved road and came to know every mountain, stream, and river as well.

Soon after he joined ODOT he organized a Dixieland jazz quartet and named it the "TransTooters" to play for all ODOT dedications for road and bridge openings and other official events. Ken was the featured soloist on the clarinet, and they played throughout Oregon

together for almost twenty years. With his dry sense of humor, Ken created their official performance costumes featuring Styrofoam Dixieland-style brimmed hats and day-glow orange ODOT safety vests.

Later while at ODOT, Ken became interested in the future of computers in state government and started taking computer programming classes. He became the Data Administrator for ODOT's Information Services Division until he retired in 1997. He also founded and was president of the Portland Metro Chapter of the Data Administration Users Association (DAMA).

Ken moved to the historic Northeast Neighbors Neighborhood Association (NEN) area and immediately began organizing neighbors to stop the proposed widening of Center Street NE and their campaign was successful. He became chair of NEN and was able to establish the residential parking permit system so that residences near the Capitol Mall, many of which did not have garages, could have on-street parking. Ken also received permission for street closures at Court and Chemeketa Streets NE where they intersected with 14th Street NE to slow down speeders and protect residents.

Ken married Barbara Carey in 1977. They met playing in the orchestra for "Kiss Me Kate" and performed in many musicals through the years at Pentacle Theater including cabaret events featuring music from George Gershwin and Cole Porter and playing in the Salem Pops Orchestra. When Ken's daughter Jane acted in "Fiddler on the Roof" Ken and Barb played in the orchestra.

Shortly after they were married, Ken's Grandmother Helen, back living in Chicago, needed assisted living care after a bad fall. It was extremely hard to find openings in Chicago, so Ken and Barb offered to have Helen come to Oregon to get better care. She loved Oregon and regularly seeing her great grandchildren. Ken took Poland-born Helen, who had never seen a tall mountain, to Mt. Hood and on car trips throughout the Willamette Valley and the Oregon coast.

Then, Ken and Barb persuaded his parents, after a particularly brutal

winter in Chicago, to also move to Salem. To make the move easier for them, Ken and Barb offered them their house while they bought another one nearby. After Ken's parents moved to Salem, he stopped by to see them during his lunch hour almost every day.

In 1980 Ken was elected to the Salem City Council and served until 1984. He worked to save and restore the historic Elsinore Theater with the "Save the Elsinore" Committee. He was proud to get approval for the City of Salem to replace the ancient sewer system in the downtown Ward One he represented. He was especially delighted to get a congratulatory poem from his mom for the dedication-- typed on a piece of toilet paper! In 1985, he was awarded the City of Salem's Distinguished Citizen Award.

Ken and Barb shared a love of Salem and Oregon and worked together on many community and political campaign activities. Travel included trips and hiking excursions to every part of Oregon as well as England, France, Italy, Germany, Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Mexico and visits to almost every state in the US, many by train.

In the 1980s Ken and Barb began canoeing adventures with good friends and family and canoed the North Santiam, South Santiam, Rogue, Deschutes, Grand Ronde, and John Day Rivers. Starting that year, for nearly 30 years, Ken also began going with colleagues from ODOT on annual drift boat camping and fishing trips. They fished the Deschutes, John Day, North Santiam, and Grand Ronde Rivers.

In 1984 Ken completed the Portland Marathon finishing in under four hours. Ken had many outdoor adventures including winter mountaineering on all the Three Sisters Mountains, Steens Mountain, Mt. Washington and Mt. St. Helens before the eruption. After the eruption of Mt. St. Helens, Ken and his son KC were in the first group officially allowed into the Red Zone to ski into Spirit Lake.

During KC and Jed's high school years, each summer Ken and friend Dave Moss took them hiking on adjoining sections of the Pacific Crest

Trail in Oregon starting at the Columbia Gorge and finishing near the border with California by the time they graduated from high school.

Winters were spent taking the Mt. Hood Meadows weekly ski bus to Mt. Hood and skiing the expert "black diamond" routes there. In later years, he was delighted that he got to ski at Mt. Bachelor many times with his New York granddaughters.

In 1989 Ken became an original member of the Salem Big Band, arranging music and acting as emcee and featured saxophone soloist for 25 years. He organized exceedingly popular monthly ballroom dances for all ages at the Willamette Heritage Center which included a free dance class beforehand.

Around the same time, Ken and friends who also shared a Chicago connection, started the annual "Chicago Party." It was open to all and featured Chicago-style hot dogs and pizza, videos of the Cubs baseball team games and many remarkable stories of living in Chicago. One unexpected highlight was when Ken met the mother of Janet Schneider (wife of restauranter Fred Schneider) who was visiting from Chicago. She recognized the Bonnem name and told Ken she had dated Ken's dad Joe in the 1930's and had met Ken's grandmother Frances, who Ken never knew.

In 1991, when bicycling was a better option than running after one of his knees gave out, Ken first biked in the 1991 Cycle Oregon. From then on, Ken and Barb and other family and friends participated each year in the Oregon Bike Ride across Oregon including sons KC and Jed.

In 1997, after Ken retired from ODOT, he organized a Thursday bicycling group with friends for 50- mile rides throughout the Willamette Valley, always with a great lunch at the destination. That group met for 23 years until Covid.

In 2002, Ken rode his bicycle across the U.S. in 63 days from Washington State to Massachusetts with Cycle America. Since this was before cell phones, Ken called Barb from a public phone booth

each night to relay his “Pocket Mail Chronicles” adventures which were then forwarded to hundreds of e-mail followers including those in several nursing homes.

When Ken reached Illinois on the bi-coastal Cycle America ride, Barb joined him to attend a reunion organized in his honor with the former superintendent and public affairs staff of the Rockford School District he had last seen thirty years before. The final highlight for Ken was being greeted by two-year-old granddaughter Sarah at the end of the trip to Massachusetts.

Ken grew up looking for other Bonnems in the Chicago phone directory every year but never found any. Starting in early 2002 using online genealogy sites, Ken and Barb eventually found some information about Bonnem ancestors in Germany. In 2009 they spent a month in Germany and found links to a great, great uncle’s family in Wilmette, Illinois, surprisingly close to Chicago. They also discovered that his great grandfather had a variety of businesses throughout Manhattan in NY. In 2010, they organized a Bonnem family reunion in Chicago with the Wilmette, Illinois descendants attended by most of the existing Bonnem branches from around the US.

Later years were spent with daily walks across the pedestrian bridge he called the “Hazel Bridge” for founder Hazel Patton. He would then meet a group of friends for coffee at the Governor’s Cup downtown. He also enjoyed almost daily bike rides through Riverfront Park to Minto-Brown Island.

In 2016, Ken celebrated his 80th birthday by inviting long-time bicycling friends and family to ride eighty miles together through the Willamette Valley including lunch along the way, of course.

In 2018 Ken was diagnosed with Parkinson’s Disease following a near fatal bout of Spinal Meningitis. However, he continued to work hard to stay strong and continued to walk and bicycle as much as possible until he was no longer able after Covid. Until recently, he

continued to join his longtime Governor's Cup coffee friends.

Ken leaves his wife Barbara, his three children Jed (Kate), Jane, and KC, five granddaughters, brother Don Bonnem (Monica), brother-in-law Craig Calhoun (Hilary), nieces Christine Bonnem, Molly and Nicole Calhoun and nephew Curt Bonnem (Jaime).

At his request, there was no memorial. To honor him, take a walk, bicycle ride, hike or visit a place in Oregon you have never been-- followed by a great lunch, of course.