

The Life and Times of Jim O'Brien

The Early Years

In the beginning we were the 3 Musketeers; Jimmy, Eileen, and Danny.

We played together all the time.

Games like Cowboys and Indians, Hide and Seek, and One-Two-Three Red Light.

Summer Days were spent at the Bristol Parks making cloth Pot Holders and plastic Braided Necklaces for Mom.

On Saturday afternoon it was off to the movie theater to see those Cowboys get the Bad Guys - Jimmy was a Hop-Along Cassidy fan.

Jimmy would often take me to the Bristol Boys Club for games and swimming.

Then we became the Fab Five when Jocelyn and Eloise arrived.

Sunday afternoons there were trips to Grandmother O'Brien's in a car filled with CIGAR Smoke.

In the fall, there were Cider and Donut picnics ... riding in a car filled with CIGAR Smoke.

In the summer, there were trips to the beach ... in a car filled with CIGAR Smoke.

Something really got Jimmy's attention during those early years.

Dad would take us to Midget Races and Jimmy checked out everything.

At Danbury Fairgrounds Jimmy elbowed me and said, "That kid is pretty good." That kid was Mario Andretti.

At Plainville Stadium Jimmy told me to watch the Flagman, "He doesn't miss anything that's going on out there." The Flagman was Nick Fornoro, who later flagged the Indy 500.

Jimmy built his first race cars back then; Soap Box Derby cars.

Dad bought an old Ford V8-60 powered midget - it was painted orange and white and had a large # 7 on the tail.

That began a lifetime commitment to racing for Jim O'Brien.

The Middle Years

From 1956 to 1957 Jimmy helped build the house on Stevens St. in Bristol - he was only 15 yrs old.

During these years he had some really cool cars including a super-charged Studebaker Golden Hawk, a 1958 Ford Police Interceptor, and then a brand new 1964 Chevy Impala SS with a 327 V8.

Jimmy followed all forms of auto racing; Midgets, Champ Cars, Indy Cars, NASCAR, Modifieds and Super Modifieds.

His favorite movies were Mickey Rooney in "The Big Wheel" and Robert Mitchum in "Thunder Road".

Once about the time of the Kentucky Derby, Dad asked Jimmy why he loved auto racing but didn't care for horse racing. Jimmy said, "Race cars DON'T have to stop to GO."

That Chevy Impala SS took Jimmy on several great road trips.

He drove Dad and me to the 1964 Indianapolis 500.

Later Jimmy and a friend drove from CT to LA along the famous Rt 66 highway. Actually, the town of Radiator Flats in the movie CARS is typical of the small American towns on Rt 66 that were by-passed by the Interstate Highway System.

Jimmy began his working life as a gifted Machinist at Chandler-Evans Co. in Hartford.

There he learned the skills that prepared him for an outstanding career as a Production Engineer and for building his many race cars during the rest of his life.

He fell in love with and married Sandy Heath. They had 4 wonderful sons; James (now called Seamus), Christopher, Dennis, and Mathew.

The Racing Years

Jim's first midget racecar was a gold colored # 16 with a Ford Falcon engine.

His mentor and dear friend was Chuck Daniels, who always helped him.

If you ever wondered why Jim chose the number 16, it was to honor Mom who died in 1969 (the ONE) and his family (the SIX).

He called his race team, "Jim O'Brien & Sons, Engineering", because his family meant so much to him.

Each racecar was called the Pink Panther and had the Pink Panther (from the Peter Sellers movie) painted by Jim's good friend, Bill Bailey.

Jim had many great drivers for those cars but his favorite driver was his son, Matt.

Jim developed a number of great friends in the racing community.

He seemed to know everyone and everyone seemed to know him.

I once took Jim to the Copper Classic Race in Phoenix, AZ and was shocked when the Track Announcer asked the 50,000 fans, "Hey who is that guy with Jim O'Brien?"

I met Jim twice for the Chili Bowl Midget Races in Tulsa, OK.

Last summer he came to WA State for the Jim Raper Memorial Skagit Dirt Cup Races.

He would travel to NH and watch his son Dennis race every chance he had.

Jim received just about every award possible in his racing career.

He was most appreciative of being inducted into the New England Midget Racing Hall of Fame.

And he was very proud to attend the induction ceremony for Dave Humphrey of the Northeastern Midget Association into the National Midget Hall of Fame two years ago in Tulsa, OK.

The Family Years

Jim was very proud of his family.

Seamus has become a Lead for Best Practices Seminars at Major Utility Companies in Boston, MA.

Christopher is a Professional Real Estate Manager in FL. He helped Jim with his finances and with Jim's property in FL.

Dennis is married to Melissa. They have three of Jim's grandchildren; DJ, Mitch, and Tabitha. Dennis works for UPS.

Matt is married to Sue. They have two more of Jim's grandchildren; Sam and Ben. Matt is an Architect in Boston.

Jim loved to be with his family on every possible occasion whether it was something special like a holiday or a birthday OR just a visit to see the kids or go to a race with them.

Jim once asked me why I retired.

I told him, "I did not think I wanted to lie on my deathbed saying I wish I spent less time at work or on my race car - my family and friends are a much better investment of my time!"

Jim UNDERSTOOD and he agreed.

He treasured every precious second he had with his family.

The Checked Flag

I once took a trip with my Dad to Montreal. Along the way we got to talking about death. I asked him, "Do you worry about death?"

He said, "No, death is only a door. On the other side is the refuge."

I wasn't sure I heard him correctly. So I said, "Refuge?"

He said, "Yes REFUGE."

Still not sure what he meant - and not wanting to sound stupid – I said, "Oh yea, refuge."

Years later I figured out that REFUGE meant... a safe place, a sanctuary.

But I was not sure how Dad came to that understanding until just a few months ago when I read the 62nd Psalm of David from my Bible.

"For God alone my soul waits in silence,

For my hope is in Him.

He only ... is my rock, my salvation, my fortress ...

I shall not be shaken.

On God rests my deliverance and my honor; my mighty rock,

My REFUGE is God. Trust in Him at all times, O people;

Pour out your heart before Him: God is REFUGE for us all."

Jim, someday, we'll meet again on the other side of that door!

Until then REST IN PEACE and may the PERTETUAL LIGHT SHINE upon you.

Daniel Peter O'Brien