

Evan Armstrong – BS 1962 Pharmacy

Evan Lowell Armstrong passed away peacefully in Spokane, Washington on October 28, 2023 at age 88.

Born October 22, 1935, to Olga Signora Hammer and Everett John Armstrong in Spokane, Armstrong attended Logan and Finch Elementary Schools, where he proudly won the Duncan Golden Yoyo Championship. As a boy, he exhibited signs of entrepreneurship by tracking down abandoned out-of-bounds golf balls at Downriver Golf Course and reselling them to golfers at the entrance. As a teenager in the summertime, he would pick vegetables on Eastern Washington farms with migrant workers from Mexico and learned to love their culture and their food.

He graduated Northwest Christian High School in 1953 and was Class President. He loved fast cars, bought a '57 Chevy and would race at the Stateline and Deer Park "drag strips" with his buddies. He also loved to waterski and built his own boat by hand from a kit. In 1958, he married Joyce Anderson, with whom he had two children. He joined the Air National Guard, serving at Lackland, TX AFB, Fargo, ND and Geiger, WA. In 1962 he graduated North Dakota State Pharmacy College and joined his father's Model Pharmacy business in the Logan neighborhood. He entered a national drugstore magazine contest and won a 1964 Chevrolet Corvair. He sold it and used the money to open Spokane's first Taco Time fast food restaurant, betting that his hometown would love Mexican food as much as he did. He was right. From there he added Taco Times throughout Spokane, North Idaho and beyond, developing new menu items and perfecting his famous Mexi-fry recipe. When American POW Lt. Col. Dale Storr was released from Iraqi captivity during the Gulf War and brought home to Spokane, Storr said, "First stop was Taco Time. I had to have Mexi-fries."

Armstrong expanded into many types of themed restaurants: Captain's Kettle Fish and Chips, Smitty's, Perkins, Arby's, Fuddruckers, Amigos, N'Rico Chicken, Taco Mejico, Rice Time Express, Omni Restaurant, Rocking Horse Saloon and the city's first freestanding full-service Mexican restaurant, Casa Blanca. The Casa Blanca Restaurant and Cantina opened in downtown Spokane with emerging chef Fernando Maldonado to create a unique Mexican-American menu. Famous for large "747" burritos, sizzling fajitas, monstrous margaritas, and the hottest bands of the 1970's, customers would wait in long lines around the iconic stucco building. Under his parent corporation, Omni Foods, Armstrong became the largest employer of Hispanic workers at the time.

In the mid-70's he married Ann Van Vliet, had another daughter, and expanded his restaurant partnerships in six states, briefly living in Texas and Arizona. Armstrong became the President of the Spokane Convention and Visitors Bureau before retiring and divesting ownership in 60 restaurants during his career. One of Armstrong's greatest passions was employing young people in the food-service industry, especially helping them achieve their dreams of college, sometimes with scholarships and adjusting their work schedules for school, or even management training to eventually open their own restaurant.

In retirement, Armstrong returned to medical work. He volunteered for many years helping seniors analyze their insurance coverages as a Washington State Health Insurance Benefit Advisor (SHIBA).

An avid sports fan, Armstrong would travel the West Coast, watching the University of Arizona basketball games in person, and cheering on his grandchildren at their sporting events. He and his son, Joel, entered and won the Silver State Classic Challenge high speed road race in the 1990's, driving his BMW 540iA at speeds over 150mph in the Nevada Desert. His racing bug wasn't limited to cars. He loved horse racing and bankrolled a chestnut thoroughbred, "Evan's First," with trainer Gary Owens, competing at Playfair and around the region, placing six times. Armstrong was a descendant of Johnnie Armstrong of Gilnockie from the Armstrong Clan of the Scottish/English Border and was related to astronaut Neil Armstrong, the first man on the moon. His ancestors were of Norwegian, Welsh and Scotch-Irish descent, immigrating to America as farmers.

Armstrong is survived by his children: Candace Armstrong (Steve) Mumm, Joel (Kristen) Armstrong, Kristin Armstrong (Juan) Orozco; stepchildren: Steve (Remy) Van Vliet, Scott Van Vliet, Shari Sivret, Shana (Corey) Weisner; two nieces and three nephews; Grandchildren: Amanda (Jason) Lasko, Madison (Tanner) Peterson, Emily (Jacob) Hangartner, Morgan Armstrong, and Arianna Orozco; Great-Grandchildren: Parker and Makenna Peterson, and Luke Lasko.

A Celebration of Life is planned for Wednesday, November 8th at 10:00 am at the Shadle Park City Library Event Center, 2111 W. Wellesley Avenue. Donations appreciated to the Holy Names Music Center for Children - HNMC.org