

A Good word for JL

J.L. Boyd lived the best life. I mean, can you imagine 93 better years. Lived anywhere? Any time? J.L. lived the best life.

If you don't believe me, his 1996 autobiography called, "J.L.'s Story," makes that claim virtually indisputable. When he died last week at 93, we came one sad but inevitable step closer to writing into the history books the American chapter which Tom Brokaw has called *The Greatest Generation*. J.L.'s story makes so very clear why Brokaw's praise of those lives had it just right. They had enough to enjoy and appreciate life's comforts, but they had scrapped and saved and worked for every penny, so they also learned the value of earning the comforts you enjoy. "J.L.'s Story" begins this way: "Jerome Leander Boyd, Jr. (J.L.), which comes from my father's name, was born January 4, 1923, in Selma, Alabama." And just before his signature is scratched out on the last page, which somehow looks like the product of his time, J.L. ends his life story by saying, "I would like for my grandchildren to remember me as a favorite friend."

Has there ever been a better ending to any story you have ever read?

I don't know J.L. Boyd's grandchildren, except to have read about their proud births in his own words, but I would bet my next paycheck, and maybe double down with Amy's check, too, that J.L. got his wish, and that Amalie and Allyson, Chelsea and Josh and Darby, Jenna and James and Justin know just what they lost last Sunday – and it wasn't just his grandchildren who lost a "favorite friend," on May 29. J.L.'s Story is checkered with the use of that word, "friend," and I have no doubt that his broad, warm smile and the twinkle in his mischievous eye, his love of fellowship and fun and the convictions that made him faithful to God and country and family, made him a "favorite friend" to a lot of people.

I think he lists every house he and Jane bought or built, but instead of charting his successful career or quietly tracing an increasing standard of living by emphasizing the neighborhood, detailing the square footage

or remembering what they paid for each, he identifies their homes by the friends they made – I’m sure, as soon as they moved in.

Maybe it was because J.L. and Jane were raised during the Great Depression and learned that no matter how successful you are, or how hardworking, it can all come crashing down – but somewhere along the way they learned the value of community, of leaning on one another. So important were friends and friendship to the Boyds that all of their children bear the names of someone with no blood kinship, but who through the sharing of their lives had become... family.

Their first child was John William (named after Jane’s father and their friend Dub Fulgham), and J.L. says he was, “the holy terror of the neighborhood.” Now, the J.L. Boyd I knew was a gentleman of the first order, reserved and polite... but he gives us a little insight into his own childhood – and that detail about John... well, it might have been a subtle clue that the apple doesn’t fall that far from the tree! J.L. and his childhood friends, Dub and T., Ed and John and of course, Jim King, knew their own share of devilishness. Like that time they took homemade kerosene torches into the drain pipe under Birmingham’s First Avenue, and ended up losing most of their hair when some gases in the pipe exploded and blew out every manhole cover for a solid mile!

So there was a mischievous twinkle in his eye, but a deeper strength kept a poor Alabama boy, whose mother had died when he was six, grounded and focused on more important things. Against all odds J.L. found his way in and out of the Second World War and Howard College and Auburn University. He got his wings in July of 1944 and served his country with distinction, winning a Distinguished Flying Cross and his squadron’s Navy Commendation. He finished Auburn with a degree in Electrical Engineering five years later, and he spent four decades in various capacities with Southern Bell.

I could detail for you his war record and his distinguished engineering career, but something more important than those two histories made J.L. Boyd the great man he was – and that’s a story I can tell you because you don’t need to see the medals or the corporate citations to see character and integrity in a man’s eye.

J.L. Boyd could fix anything, and his neighborhood and his friends and the Shepherd Center that he served so faithfully knew it. So his house and shop were full of mowers and motors and radios, lots of parts and lots of pieces, everywhere. Bettye says as a teenager she remembers just always wanting something new, because all of their stuff (their appliances and her hair dryers) had duct tape and signs of J.L.’s frugal creativity scratched all over them. Then she became an adult, started paying the bills – and she started taking her stuff over to his house, like everyone else did!

“J.L.’s Story” includes these words: “I worked for a company for 40 years that stressed safety... This probably made me overprotective. .. Advice for my grandchildren is to stay away from drugs... and stay off of motorcycles!” Needless to say, the boy that came to pick Bettye up on two wheels... went away without a date that night!

You can’t tell J.L. and Jane Boyd’s story without saying the words “Lake Norman” or “Beach Trip with the Kings.” They bought a lot on the lake in 1978, and the Boyds have more memories of their times there as a family than they can even remember. Apparently J.L. was able to teach everyone to ski, except for Jane, and when the kids had those wave runners, well, he never said a word, but, like a hawk, he never missed them taking a ride either!

And his life-long friendship with Jim King is nothing short of legendary. His daughter, Bettye, was named for Jim’s wife, Betty, and his son, James, was named for Jim himself. That friendship grew from an adventuresome southern childhood to more than two dozen King and Boyd family members who spent a week together every summer, and Jane and J.L. traveled with these friends across the country: New England to Yellowstone to Alaska. The night before J.L. died, he asked his caregiver... “Where’s Jim? Where are the

girls?” (meaning Jane and Betty King) And after almost 90 years of friendship, who could be surprised at that question?

Sometimes a person’s final years change them, and understandably so. But from what I can tell, Jerome Leander Boyd was all J.L. all the way to the end. He still loved that Outer Banks seafood and Allyson’s and Amalie’s sweet treats. He still loved family time, and still had a sharp mind – just ask Bettye about all those games of “Crazy Eights”! He was still protective, though he had to shuffle a bit to watch over toddling Eliza, his beautiful, great-granddaughter.

The consistency of his strength is a reflection of the integrity of his character, from start to finish. He was a patriot, with the medals to prove it. He was a servant to his church, a deacon and leader, which reflected his deep, quiet faith, his life-long faithfulness. He knew the meaning of words of commitment: “for better or for worse, till death us do part.” He and Jane, who was, “the cutest pianist he had ever seen,” had six decades to prove those vows to one another, and their family will carry their love forward in the legacy they live.

And J.L. Boyd loved his friends, there can be no doubt. His simple but beautiful autobiography makes this so clear. His friends were many, and he calls them by name: Craig, Staire, Carter, Stabler, Knapp, Cook, Johnson, Kirby, Geanes, Jones, Vehorn, Radermacher, McKinsey, White, Buckley, Henderson... Jim King. He loved being a friend, having friends.

Before he left his disciples, Jesus said, “*No longer will I call you servants... I have called you friends...*” I like to think J.L. heard those same words on Sunday, because he lived the best life, and because of the integrity of his faith and because of his friends... he still does.

For Jerome Leander Boyd, J.L., thanks be to God!