

Joe O'Leary



In a life spanning more than nine decades, Joe O'Leary's curiosity and sense of patriotism have led him to love, family, a career and marvelous adventures.

"I'm Irish," he says in his New England brogue. "I talk too much...and I'm curious about everything."

Joe was born on Christmas Day 1924 to Timothy and Amy O'Leary, outside of Boston. He has three brothers—Tim, George and Bill—and two sisters—Marie and Peggy. The family lived first in a tenement and then in their own house. His father worked for a soda machine company and later as a plumber. Tim O'Leary was also a betting man, and he paid for the family's house in Winchester with \$500 in winnings.

Tragically, Tim died when Joe was 7-years old, and his mother was forced to take in laundry to pay the bills. But Joe got busy helping: with his older brother, he delivered newspapers and magazines, set pins in a bowling alley, worked for a milk delivery service and later for a newspaper distributor. "Anything to make a buck," he says. Some jobs came with perks: The newspaper distributor let him drive his Packard convertible. "I was a teenager," he laughs. "Life didn't get any better!"

Joe joined the Navy the day after his 18th birthday, December 26, 1942, and was assigned to a light cruiser in the Pacific.

In 1946, he returned to Massachusetts where he took advantage of the GI Bill and enrolled in business courses at Bentley College. His talent and enthusiasm caught the eye of a recruiter who worked for General Electric and offered him a job at the company's facility in Lynn, MA. Joe went on to spend 38 years at GE, working in finance and assisting manufacturing and engineering groups in the contractor market.

An avowed patriot, Joe tried to re-enlist in the Navy at the start of the Korean War. He traveled from Connecticut to Washington, DC to request his Congressman's help. His petition was denied, but the visit became a grand success when the Congressman's secretary suggested Joe take in the sights with her unmarried daughter. That's how he met Nancy Moloney.

He was interested immediately, but concerned about her intentions. Joe was a traditional family man. "If you're a girl who wants a career," he told her, "look for someone else." She said she didn't, and between 1956 and 1964 they brought into the world Martha, Stephen, Peter, David and John; and Susan, who alas died at birth. "Family was everything," he says recalling this time. "My father died young, I never knew him. I never wanted my kids to say, 'I don't remember him,' so we did everything together...meals, walks in the woods, museums, church."

The family's travels were numerous, including trips to Cape Cod, Canada and Mexico City. The latter, he says, was a horror. Traffic was crazy and he feared for his young family's life; eventually he hired two policemen to escort them out of the city.

He recalls watching the moon landing in Nova Scotia on the family's way back from a visit to Newfoundland. Joe stayed with GE until 1986. After he retired, he and Nancy traveled extensively. "Fifteen times we went to Europe," he says. "I've been everywhere from Poland to Portugal." But he got tired of seeing "broken-down ruins" and "another blasted cathedral," or "ABCs," as he wryly dubbed them. He decided instead to see more of the USA: "So many natural wonders!" Ultimately, he visited every national park and Civil War battleground.

Along the byways of North America—down the Mississippi, across the Rio Grande, along the Trans-Canada Highway—Joe stopped anywhere that piqued his fancy. "I've got some strange habits," he says, recounting random visits to the headquarters of a trucking company and the field of an independent crop duster. Visits to factories producing Airstreams, Winnebagos, Toyotas and Corvettes earned him acquaintances everywhere.

When Nancy died in 2002, Joe mourned her loss but tried to keep busy. In 2005 he booked a 62-day cruise across the Pacific. "I wanted to see the places I'd been," he says, recalling his World War II service. On the ship, he attended a chapel service. "I used to go every day," he says. "It never hurts to ask for help."

"Help" this time came in the form of Ellis Ozleck, a widow from Temperance, Mich., a small city just north of Ohio. Six months later, he moved from Connecticut to Michigan to marry her, and they continued to travel and attend church until Ellis had a stroke. The couple eventually relocated to The Woodlands at Sunset House in Toledo.

Ellis died in 2016 and Joe, by then needing a walker himself, stayed put in the elegant independent living community. With his children dispersed across the country, including in Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Virginia and South Carolina, Joe communicates mostly through FaceTime. Several years ago, he attended a family gathering on Kiawah Island, but that was the last time he traveled. He now has nine grandchildren, some of whom have children of their own.

"I don't regret anything, he says. "I don't analyze. I never hold a grudge...I've had a marvelous life."