

From The Lincoln Times, Lincoln County North Carolina.

John Zeitler a man who knew few, if any, limitations to imagination, possibilities

John Edgar Zeitler was a racecar driver who happened to have studied design engineering. He was also the kind of man who liked to do things himself; so in 1958, when he was unsatisfied with the performance of his MGA racecar, he decided to build his own.

His drive to do things himself had nothing to do with pride.

He wasn't a proud man. He wanted it done and he wanted it done right, said his wife, Martha Jane Putnam Zeitler.

Martha Zeitler recounted that later in her husband's life, when he worked at a factory in Charlotte, he would often go in on weekends and fix machinery himself.

John Zeitler died Thursday, July 14. He was born in South Bend, Indiana in 1925. He had studied engineering at Middlebury College in Vermont and graduated from Northrop Aeronautical Institute in California, but he had a natural talent for invention.

When he was still a kid, he invented a scuba tank out of a barrel and a hose. All he wanted was to get some things off the bottom of the river.

He invented scuba diving before Jacques Cousteau, said his grandniece, Ti Boshart.

Much of his life was marked by this sort of understated innovation.

He was a quiet person who was in the background, said Martha.

John Zeitler had been involved with racing since 1952. After he built his own car in 1958, he couldn't stop. When Volkswagen released the Formula Vee series in the 1960's, John Zeitler raced one, then decided to build his own. That car would become a prototype for the Zeitler Formula Vee racing cars.

The Zeitler cars ran well, regularly placing high and winning in the circuits. In 1971, at the Road Atlanta SCCA Road Race of Champions, John Zeitler won a silver medal in one of his cars. The first place winner was also in a Zeitler.

John Zeitler found himself with a demand for the cars. Even though not every part was made by him, each Zeitler car had a piece of John Zeitler in it.

I never want to reach the point where I'm turning out cars like they are sausages, Zeitler once said in an interview with Sports Car magazine. I do this for fun and want a personal hand in each car. □

That is how his family remembers him, as a man who enjoyed making and fixing things.

If you needed anything metal fixed, remembered Martha, you just had to ask him. □

She met John Zeitler in the 1970s in Charlotte.

It was a blessing. I wasn't supposed to be there, she said. Although she doesn't remember the specifics why she was someplace she wasn't supposed to be, she does believe their initial meeting was at an automobile race.

Eventually they got married. He took on the role of stepfather to Martha Zeitler's children from a previous marriage.

He was a brave man to enter this family, said Laura Flowers, Martha Zeitler's daughter, who manages an Olive Garden in Myrtle Beach.

The children accepted and loved John Zeitler.

He became their father, not their stepfather, said Martha Zeitler.

They found they could ask him about anything.

He would give me advice on buying a car, profit sharing, you name it, said Flowers. And 10 out of 10 times he was right. □

The only time Flowers could remember catching him off-guard was one day when he was telling her to get the clothes off the line before the dew fell.

Dew doesn't fall, she told him. It collects in one place. □

He had patience with the children. He would argue with Boshart about politics. He would show his children and grandchildren how to build things.

Even as they grew up, whenever John Zeitler came to visit them, they had a list of thing for him to fix at their houses.

As we got older, we hated to ask him, but it had to be done, said Flowers.

John Zeitler never resented it. He loved to make things. After he settled down in Crouse, which he said had a population lower than the condominium where he had lived before, he continued to work.

He made a leaf mulcher one day just to help him in the front yard. When he worked for AW Bohanan Company he invented a machine that could fill 2,000 capsules a minute.

He was just brilliant that way, Martha Zeilter said.

He even went through the process to become a member of the Eastern Star, which Martha already belonged to, so he could be with his wife more.

That's a lot to go through to spend with Martha Jane, said Boshart.

Even on his last day, Wednesday, John Zeilter spent the day working in his shed.

Martha said she still thinks sometimes that he is only on vacation.

John is probably the best thing that happened to me, besides my children, she said.

I think that over the years we will remember a lot of the things he said as profound, said Flowers.

by Caleb Hawkins