

Family: Former TV anchor Kelly's life a 'celebration'

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(Photo: Gordon Castelnero)

John Kelly, a fixture on WX(Z) (Channel 7) news for decades, died Saturday after a long illness, according to family.

He was 88.

"I'll tell you one thing, the one thing that he would want," stepson Dean Turner said Monday. "He always said 'I was here, I had a great run, I had fun, and when I pass, I want it to be a celebration.' He had the old Irish in him and he was always talking about how his life was blessed, and when he passed, he wanted everyone to have a drink and have a celebration."

Kelly was Detroit TV royalty, getting his start here as a newscaster at WJBK (Channel 2) — now Fox 2 — in August of 1965.

In the mid '70s, Kelly was hired away by WX(Z) along with co-anchor Jae LeGoff and weather caster Marilyn Turner. Kelly married Turner in 1974, according to family.

His birth surname was Kelin but he tweaked it to Kelly for his broadcast career, according to friends and family.

As his star rose, Kelly stayed grounded in his family, son John Kelin said.

"He was a devoted father ... he did the things that fathers are supposed to do," Kelin said. "He went to all my little league games, he was active in the Boy Scout troops that I was involved in. He would always drive us to the weekend campouts and that sort of thing."

Kelin was raised in the Detroit area and now lives in Louisville, Colorado, near Boulder. He visited about a year ago and again this summer, when he witnessed his father's steady decline in health.

"It was obvious that it wasn't going to be much longer," Kelin said of the July visit. "I got a call on Friday night that he had taken a turn for the worse and then he died on Saturday morning. It was unexpected but not surprising."

Kelly died at a health and living center in Southfield, his son said. He previously lived with his wife in Beverly Hills.

Kelin, a writer, said he jotted down copious notes during his visit last year.

"I didn't really expect him to come up with some profound statement or revelation — **and** he didn't," Kelin said. "But nevertheless, it was a good conversation and he reflected a lot of on his life and career."

That career included time at WJBK and continued with his switch to WXYZ.



John Kelly, on the set of "Kelly and Company." (Photo: Photo courtesy of John Ke/in)

"To entertain does not necessarily mean to amuse," Kelly once said, according to his son. "Not to me. Not to us. It means to grab and hold the viewers' attention. We tell them something they didn't know or remind them of something they'd forgotten. We warn them of danger, or help them get better, or point them in a direction, or give them a good feeling and even make them nostalgic."

Former colleague and meteorologist Jerry Hodak followed from WJBK in 1977, Hodak said Monday morning.

"We socialized, went to dinner with our families and became very close," Hodak said. "Usually in that business, sometimes you get competitive, but that was never the case with us. John was always very open and gave advice, which I followed. He was more than a colleague. It was one of those true strong friendships."

Hodak described Kelly as a "very outgoing" man like seen on television.

"For some reason, despite the difference in our ages, we became fast friends," Hodak said. "I don't know if it was our sense of humor being similar."

Hodak hesitated when asked to share an example of the pair's dry, sarcastic sense of humor.

"What can I tell you that is clean enough to print in a family newspaper?"

"It was a dry sense of humor that we both appreciated; that we both liked," Hodak said. "And also, sometimes it was very visual. (One time), someone sent him a picture of me graduating the eighth grade and he had the visual department work up something and put it on the air."

Another time, an on-air piece called for an individual to get pied in the face.

"So they selected John to throw it and me to get it and he took great delight in it," Hodak said.

The group's friendship often leaked into their career decisions. Back when the group was being wooed by WXYZ, Hodak initially balked until he was assured Turner would be happy in her new role while he took over as weather caster for the channel.

"I said only if Marilyn is happy doing something that she wants to do," Hodak said. "We knew each other very well and I didn't want to take her job."

Kelly and Turner, by then married, eventually moved into hosting a morning TV variety show called "Kelly and Company" and another called "Good Afternoon, Detroit."

"She went on to great success," Hodak said.

The morning show ended a 17-year run in 1995. Kelly was on the air until the mid to late '90s, Hodak said.



John Kelly was a radioman in the U.S. Navy. (Photo: Photo courtesy of John Ke/in)

"It has been said for many years and by many others that there is nothing like the Detroit audience," Kelly told The Detroit News in 2008, the year WXYZ aired a 60th anniversary tribute to the station's 1970s evening newscast team –Bill Bonds, Kelly and Turner. "We found our viewers to be loyal, supportive and enthusiastic. For almost 20 years they filled the audience on a daily basis, in some cases in the face of horrid weather and (occasionally) a show that was less (than) swell."

Kelly was born in 1927 in St. Louis and became a broadcaster after serving as a radioman in the U.S. Navy, according to his son, Kelin. He served a "brief stint" as a newspaper reporter before joining a Missouri radio station and later working at TV stations in Rockford, Illinois, and in Lansing, Atlanta, Peoria and Detroit.

"The people of this city are the best," Kelly once said, according to his son. "Detroit audiences, once they accept you, are loyal beyond all expectations."

Kelly is survived by his wife, Marilyn Turner; and his brothers Daniel and Kenneth. He also is survived by five children and several grandchildren.

Funeral arrangements are pending.

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