ESTA Remembers

BY TIM HANSEN

ESTA thanks Gary Justesen for his deep commitment to the work of the Association and Behind the Scenes

GARY KENT JUSTESEN, better known as “Frog”, passed away unexpectedly on July 2, 2019.

Frog was born September 9, 1949, the eldest of the six sons of Glade Clifford and Margaret Elaine (Toomer) Justesen. He grew up in Kearns, UT, graduating from Cyprus High School in 1967 where he played football and took a leading role “behind the curtains” in every theatrical stage production there during his high school years. It was there that he began to develop his love for the theatre and all things performance related. Frog also played guitar in several local rock bands that had notable successes throughout the area, and served in back-up bands for national touring headliners during the 1960s.

He attended the University of Utah, majoring in a music degree. He then joined the Marine Corps, and ended up serving in Vietnam where he was a forward reconnaissance radio man.

Frog’s experiences in the entertainment industry were as varied as his personality. Following military service, Frog resumed his passion for theatrical stage work at the university, and became a member of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, Local #99 in Salt Lake City. He pursued his love of production and spent the next several years touring with several well known performers, including Ballet West, Neil Diamond, Barry Manilow, and many others. Learning his craft and when necessary, inventing and developing the craft itself. The early days of the technical performance industry were new and unchartered territory. Much of what Frog learned and developed, he has passed on generously to hundreds of others, leaving a legacy of enriched artists and technicians whom he mentored, encouraged, and trained.

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During these years, he developed his long-term relationship with New York City Ballet. He spent the next 45 years continuing to tour with the Ballet, traveling throughout North America, Europe, Asia, and South America.

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In 1977, Frog realized that Salt Lake City desperately needed a company to support the growing performing arts in the area. He started Oasis Stage Werks that same year. He was an avid supporter of all levels of performers and technicians, whether a middle school teacher trying to figure out how the lights worked, or assisting a fledgling festival that became the Sundance Film Festival, helping turn a sleepy mountain town into a world renowned Festival showcase.

Frog was a founding member of the Theatrical Dealers Association, later to become the Entertainment Services and Technology Association (ESTA). He was an active participant in the Technical Standards Program and the Entertainment Technician Certification Program. His support of these programs helped both spread throughout the industry through financial support, participating in committees, providing training, and sharing his vast technical expertise, as well as directing members of his own company to serve and support these endeavors.

Frog always put his money (and energy) where his mouth was. A man who truly “walked like he talked.” He felt it was necessary to give back to the industry that had supported him over the years. In addition to his support of ESTA, he also supported USITT, and was very happy when the Intermountain Desert Region chapter of USITT was formed. His generosity extended to the high school theatre level as well. He awarded dozens of scholarships over the years to high school students through the Utah Theatre Association, in order to help them pursue their interest in technical theatre.

In the 1990s, he was a recipient of a Governors’ Arts Award medal.

His presence will be sorely missed. He touched more lives in more ways than he ever knew. As a person he was generous to a fault, kind, encouraging . . . and just plain fun to be around.

Frog is survived by his wife, Becky.

In lieu of flowers, please send donations to the Behind the Scenes Charity, at www.btshelp.org/donate, or www.behindthescenescharity.org.