

# Students remember Mr. Seems

## The Bulletin

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Jewell Elementary School teacher Arlie Seems coaches lunch-hour flag football in 2002. As quarterback, he hands off to Gracie Poteet.

Arlie Seems prepares to throw a pass in 2002.

The first rule of Silent Ball: You do not talk during Silent Ball.

The game of catch that became the hallmark of Arlie Seems' fifth-grade classroom started with everyone seated on their desks. Those who made a peep or dropped the foam ball when it was thrown to them had to return to their chairs. The last person on his or her desk was the winner.

Then again, if you track down the hundreds of students who had Seems as their fifth-grade teacher, they'll likely say that being in his class made them all winners.

Seems died Wednesday after a long battle with primary sclerosing cholangitis, a disease that begins in the bile ducts and eventually leads to severe liver problems. He was 62.

A native of Bend, Seems attended St. Francis School through the eighth grade, then graduated from Bend High School. He played second base in high school and at what was then Southern Oregon College, where met Wendy Ellis. They married in 1974 and eventually had two daughters and two grandchildren.

After his college graduation, Seems returned to Bend. He taught for five years at Buckingham Elementary School and for 25 years at R.E. Jewell Elementary School.

Seems retired in 2004, then worked for eight more years as a substitute teacher.

A longtime friend, Scott Thompson, remembers meeting Seems during their junior year at Bend High School, in typing class.

"That's where the competition began: Who could type the fastest with the fewest errors? And it went downhill from there," he says.

Seems was naturally competitive but, Thompson adds, was "never nasty about it; it was always a friendly competition."

He used this tendency in his classroom, to motivate students. Silent Ball was one example. The class played one round at the end of the day, but only if everyone finished their work and behaved themselves. Former students reminisce about the game with a sense of nostalgia that belies its simplicity.

"It would always surprise you who would win," says Justin Hanson, who is now 33. "There could be some quiet girl in the corner and nobody threw to her until the end

and ... she won."

Mike Nye, 32, had Seems for fifth-grade math. He remembers that multiplication and division tests were often timed. The fastest student won a bottle of pop from the vending machine in the teacher's lounge. Seems would deliver the prize to the winner during lunch.

Seems organized plays and talent shows at the school but was best known for running an intramural sports program at recess — flag football in the fall, softball in the spring. He ran a similar after-school program for basketball.

Any fourth- or fifth-grader who wanted to join could sign up. Seems assigned team captains and held a closed-door draft. Practices and games were held at recess. Schedules and records were posted on a bulletin board outside his classroom.

During football season, Seems was the quarterback for every team. In softball, he was the pitcher. Those positions allowed him to include every student and keep the game outcomes fair, although they eventually wrecked his right arm.

Each season culminated in an all-star game, pitting students against teachers. The whole school would turn out to watch the competition. Mark Weber, now 39, remembers that when he was in fourth grade, the all-star basketball game ended in a tie.

"We all thought, 'Oh my God, how amazing to have two teams battle for 30 minutes and ... everybody wins!' The next year," Weber says, "it was a tie again and we thought, 'How lucky is that!'"

Participants included boys and girls, jocks and couch potatoes.

Seems included — and encouraged — everyone.

"He would throw it to a person who he knew was going to drop it," Hanson says, "So we'd practice, we'd throw the ball to them more. Everyone mattered."

Nye still remembers when he first came onto Seems' radar. In flag football, the students all employed the same offensive strategy:

"Everyone runs straight down the field and yells his name to throw them the ball," Nye says.

One day, when Nye was in the fourth grade, he ran as fast and as far as he could. Seems saw him on the other side of the field and launched the football high in the air, the playground equivalent of a Hail Mary. Nye says he can still feel the thunk of the ball hitting his chest. He caught the pass.

"It was a big deal in a fourth-grader's life," he says with a laugh. "From that point on, he knew my name."

Later, when Nye became a teacher in the Redmond School District, he started a similar intramural basketball program. Nye kept the program running for a couple of years.

“It opened my eyes to the time commitment that it took to run something like that,” Nye says. “He’s giving up that lunchtime prep (period) every single day of the week.”

Ryan Timm, now 31, assumed that every school must have had “a Mr. Seems,” constantly organizing plays, talent shows and sporting events.

“I can still remember talking to my friend who went to Kenwood, and he said, ‘No, we don’t have those sports programs,’” Timm says with a laugh. “That’s just what I thought: In first grade, you notice that there’s this Mr. Seems guy who does all this awesome stuff.”

In the fourth grade, Hanson says he was elected vice president of the student government. It was Seems who encouraged him to run.

“I was all about sports,” he says. “But he said, ‘No, there’s other things to be involved in. There’s life outside of sports.’”

In the classroom, students say Seems made lessons fun. His math students, for example, designed and built their own houses out of wood.

Lisa Pike, 27, is now an art teacher in Plantation, Fla. She says that projects like that are the ones she remembers most.

“We were learning how to measure and make calculations ... and it was all integrated with art,” she says.

Pike says that Seems empowered her. A soccer player, she used to bug him about starting an intramural soccer league. Instead, he helped her launch and run her own.

“He let me run with it and it really taught me how to be a leader and ... speak for myself,” she says.

Students say Seems always remembered them when he bumped into them years later.

The last time he saw Seems, Hanson was at a grocery store with his baby boy.

“Seems slapped knuckles with him and said, ‘Alright, this is the next generation of Jewell School football players,’” he says.

Tere Chase, a mother whose children attended Jewell, says the teacher was known for his ear-to-ear grin.

“This little twinkle in his eye just melted my heart,” she says with a laugh. “I’ve been happily married for 30 years and when he smiled, he’d make me weak in the knees.”

Chase says that she bumped into Seems shortly before he died. Even though she could tell he was ill, she says he “still had that Arlie sparkle.”

To Chase, who volunteered as a room parent for years, Seems will forever be remembered as “the master and owner of Silent Ball.”

To Weber, he’s practically a second father.

"I think everybody has that guy, you know, whether it's an uncle or your boss at your first job, or just whoever it was, who helped you figure out ... who you wanted to be," he says.

Weber recalls one day when most of the class was off to do something fun, but Seems asked Weber to stay behind with a handful of students who had not finished an assignment.

"From my perspective as a fifth-grader, I'd done nothing wrong and yet I was being punished, and it was tremendously unfair. I muttered under my breath ... 'Stupid Seems, that's not fair,'" Weber says.

Seems heard him.

"He turned around and said, 'Don't ever talk behind someone's back. If you have something to say, it's important enough to say to their face,'" Weber says. "I was upset, and he ... didn't chastise me but he took care of it right then. He taught me a pretty important lesson without making me feel small."

A memorial service will be held 4 p.m. Monday at the old St. Francis Church in downtown Bend.

Today, a memorial softball game will be held at noon at R.E. Jewell Elementary School's "Seems Field." Participants should bring mitts, bats and balls, if they have them. As Seems would have no doubt wanted, this game will happen rain or shine and everyone is invited to play.

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