

John Bliss Camp



John Bliss Camp, the founding Director of the O'Brien House addiction recovery center and an active member in the recovery community for more than a half a century, passed away peacefully on Thursday, January 18th at the age of 88. His incredible mind was active and sharp until the very end, but his body could no longer prevail against the ravages of age and illness. He was comforted and blessed by the presence of family and friends throughout his last days and we are grateful for the loving care provided by the staff at The Carpenter House of St. Joseph Hospice in Baton Rouge.

John was a devoted friend to many. His wry sense of humor was injected into every single conversation and encounter. Often, we were rolling our eyes but laughing just the same. And yet, he had a big heart and was always willing to help others in need. Especially the still suffering alcoholic. John made himself available to serve by sharing his experience, strength and hope.

Born in Nashville, Tennessee on November 2, 1935, John grew up in Mobile and Tuscaloosa, Alabama, and graduated from Tuscaloosa High School. John entered the University of Alabama at the age of 16 and was expelled by the age of 17! Having chosen to party instead of studying, he says that he was kicked out for failing every subject but ROTC.

In 1952, John married his high school sweetheart, Glenda Adams, and enlisted in the Air Force shortly after the beginning of the Korean War. The Air Force moved them to California and, in a few short years, they had 4 children together. After his Honorable Discharge, he attended Broadcasting school with hopes of becoming a DJ on a radio station.

One day, a small radio station in Northern California hired him to clean up and do odd jobs and, in the process, he learned reporting by "hands-on" experience. He

became obsessed with covering the news - including some on-the-scene stories from an airplane while looking for Big Foot in northern California. He even learned to fly a small aircraft in exchange for writing commercials for the owner.

His long career in journalism truly began when he moved his family to Louisiana in 1968 to work for a Baton Rouge radio station. It was a nebulous start and he soon was fired for going 'on the air' drunk. However, as fate would have it, John's career saw rapid growth after he sobered up in February of 1971. Patricia Byrd, his second wife, rescued him from a New Orleans French Quarter gutter and got him to go to an AA meeting. This was a pivotal event in his transition to sober living. After barely 6 months of sobriety, John was asked to assemble some folks who could help with the vision of starting a recovery center in Baton Rouge. On August 14, 1971, the first meeting of the new Board of Directors for the proposed O'Brian House was held. John was the first Chairman of the Board. The rest, as they say, is history! John and OBH celebrate 53 years of association this year.

Now motivated and sober, John would rather quickly become a nationally recognized investigational reporter for local radio, TV and network news teams. His work has been the subject of books, magazine articles, newspaper stories and the grumblings of many nefarious characters throughout the country. This cliché fit him well: You know it's going to be a bad day if your morning starts with John Camp knocking on your door! Jimmy Swaggert even called him a "Derelict Gunslinger" which was the impetus for the title of John's future book.

In 1972, after working ten years as a radio reporter, News Director and talk show host, he became a full-time investigative reporter in Baton Rouge at WJBO AM. His exposé about government corruption earned him the 1973 Radio Television News Directors International Award for Investigative Reporting and several national journalism prizes. His disclosures led to the convictions of a state official and several associates.

John's Baton Rouge reporting opened doors at major marketshare television stations and network newsrooms. He left Baton Rouge for Miami, FL, and spent three years there producing prize-winning shows, including a daring exposé of Meyer Lansky - infamous crime boss. John would go on to win his first 2 Peabody Awards there. After Miami, he was hired to start the nation's first multi-member local television investigative unit in Boston.

He returned to Baton Rouge in 1982 as an investigative reporter and documentary producer for WBRZ-TV. His stories during the next seven years helped earn the station a reputation as one of the nation's top TV News organizations, winning 2 more Peabody Awards for his amazing work: "Give Me That Big Time Religion" in 1983 and "The Best Insurance Commissioner Money Can Buy" in 1988. Credit is due to all who had a part including, news director John Spain, executive producer Bob Courtney and photographer/editor Sailor Jackson.

John left WBRZ in 1989 for Cable News Network (CNN), where he was the first person hired for a thirty-member investigative reporting unit created by the network to go after big stories. John worked for CNN for 10 award-winning years and retired as Senior Investigative Correspondent.

Finally, from 2001 through 2004, he produced and narrated documentaries dealing with school desegregation and asbestos litigation for Public Broadcasting and later did some free-lance reporting for WRKF.

During his 40-year career as an investigative reporter, John won many of journalism's most prestigious awards: George Foster Peabody Medallion (4), Alfred I DuPont (3), National Headliner (3 Investigative Reporters and Editions (IRE) (3), Sigma Delta Chi Society of Professional Journalists (2), Scripps-Howard (4), Associated Press Journalist of the Year (1), American Bar Association Silver Gavel (2) and various state and regional awards. He also had two Emmy nominations.

John credits much of his professional success to the spiritual principles that he learned working a 12-step program as a member of Alcoholics Anonymous. It was while he was working this program that he met his future wife, AnnetteWomack. They married December 18, 1986 and he spent the rest of his life with her.

His work with people in the program of Alcoholics Anonymous and his support of and devotion to The O'Brien House Recovery Center is nothing short of legendary. His legacy in addiction recovery through these programs will never be forgotten.

John's life and his many adventures are depicted in his autobiographical book, *Odyssey of a Derelict Gun Slinger*. It's a great read and is still available on Amazon.

John is preceded in death by parents, William E. and Marie Camp; his son, James Michael Camp; granddaughters, Lesli Brewer-Westmoreland, Candice Aylor and Elizabeth Parker; and his first wife, Glenda Gerald. John is survived by his wife of 37 years Annette Giles Camp, his daughters Patti Galey (Matt), Terri Brewer (Jim) and Sherri Edmonds, his sons, John Robert Camp, Richard Camp (Stephanie) and Annette's children, Donna Smith, Dawn Womack, and Kenny Womack (whom he considered his own children); and his second wife, Patricia Byrd. He also leaves 23 grandchildren and a host of great grandchildren and friends.

In lieu of flowers, donations can be made in John's memory to the O'Brien House c/o the John Camp Great Room Renovation Fund

Visitation will be Friday, February 2, at First Presbyterian Church of Baton Rouge starting at 10:00 AM and the service will follow at 11:00 AM.

Interment will be a private event, with Military Honors, at Louisiana National Cemetery in Zachary, LA at 1:00 PM.