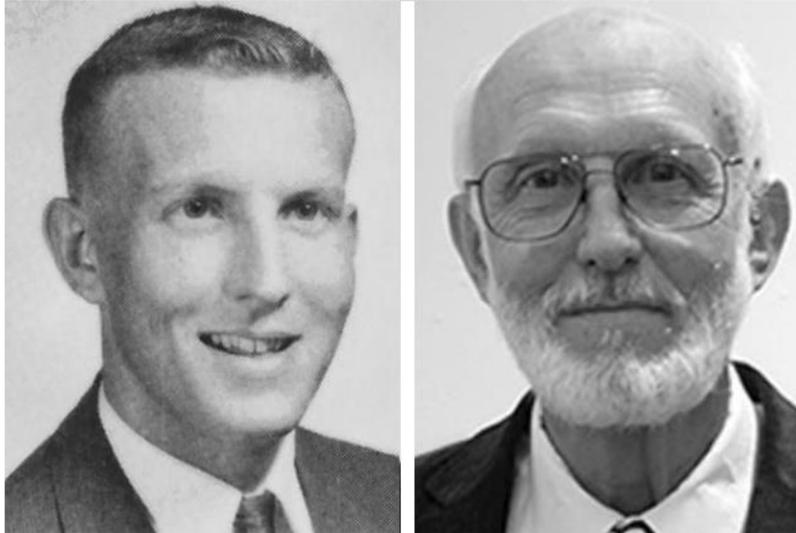


JOHN WILLIS OLSEN  
April 4, 1942 – November 21, 2019



John Willis Olsen, loving husband, father, and “Papa John” to his grandchildren, passed away in his sleep on Thursday, November 21, 2019. He was 77.

John Willis Olsen was a loving husband, dad, grandfather, treasured and renowned artist, devout Christian, musician, and so much more—with a kind, gentle nature and a sharp-witted, fun-loving sense of humor. He was smart, unpretentious, unassuming, generous, resourceful, contemplative, free-spirited, and uniquely creative. He could, and did, find humor in the everyday. John had a big heart, and he was there for everyone, with his resources, his time, or anything else he had to give. He adored his wife, children, and grandchildren, and he was proud of all of them. He was the truest; an original; one of a kind.

John was born in 1942 in Norfolk, Virginia to parents Olaf Carl Joseph Olsen of Stavanger, Norway, and Gertrude Ellen Taylor Olsen of Pensacola, Florida. John’s father died when John was young, leaving him an only child. But John found his place in a big, loving family that he embraced when he married his wife, Jane, who is one of eight siblings. John met Glenda “Jane” Horn of Escambia High School when he was attending Pensacola High. They married when they were just 20 and 21, and they celebrated their 56th wedding anniversary this year.

**(Matthew 6:33)** John was a Christian man, and he loved his church family. He played guitar and sang in church choirs, worked in prison ministries, was a lay reader and lay rector in his church and at Cursillos, was involved in youth ministries, went to Guatemala as missionary to help build a church, and he was in men's prayer groups and bible studies throughout his life.

John earned his Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree at the Kansas City Art Institute in Kansas City, Missouri. After graduation, John and Jane moved to New Orleans, Louisiana, where John earned his Master of Fine Arts Degree at Tulane University. While he was in graduate school in New Orleans, his first two children, Erik and Elka, were born. After John earned his MFA, the family moved to Pensacola, where his third child, Catlin, was born. (John also studied sculpture at the Maryland Institute College of Art.)

John taught as a professor of Fine Arts at Pensacola Junior College (PJC) for ten years at the beginning of his career, and again as an adjunct professor of Art History in his later professional life. He also taught at the University of West Florida and Troy University. At PJC, John built the sculpture foundry, and his sculpture installations built in the early 1970s remain landmarks today.

John left his professorship at PJC to build a full-time career as an independent artist. Throughout his career, John created tens of thousands of sculptures and paintings that now stand or hang in galleries, private collections, museums, institutions, and homes around the country and internationally. His work was regularly featured in and represented by 13 U.S. galleries. He was most known for his sculptures of welded, painted steel and his mesmerizing, colorful, abstract oil paintings and whimsical water colors. John enjoyed creating art that, as he said, was "simple, direct, and joyful." But he also loved to build insouciant, custom-made, large pieces that caused one to pause, double take, and marvel at the scale; John could make the heaviest metal objects seem like they were floating. His aesthetic sensibilities were genuine and easy going, but the craft behind his design was complex.

John's legacy can still be seen across Pensacola in his signature artwork in public spaces. One of his most talked-about, estimable pieces is a giant crane claw that appears to have large metal ship propellers cascading from its teeth—an awe-inspiring piece for the Southern Scrap Company and Metal Recycling Center that appeared in write ups in papers and magazines, even being named the "#1 Landmark of Pensacola." The sculpture's ingenuity, spatial finesse, and beauty—created from scrap that in itself would be considered "ugly"—showed that John

was not only an artist, but he had endless talent, cleverness, a sense of humor, and a mastery of materials and process that enabled him to create pieces that seemed to defy gravity.

Other notable works include his signature metal sculptural gates in and around downtown Pensacola; the cast bronze and carved wooden altar at Holy Cross Episcopal Church in Pensacola; a 4-story spiral staircase bird installation in a private collection in California; multiple ornate gates in private homes; and a private collection of work featured in international traveling exhibits from Greece to Japan. To John's delight and amusement, his work even appeared in episodes of the TV series, "Dallas," and "the Father Dowling Mysteries." One of John's biggest fans and collectors is the Canadian comedian and actor, Howie Mandel.

But it is in beach houses and homes from the Florida and Alabama Gulf Coasts to New Orleans to Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, and beyond that John's recognizable and iconic sculptures live. He is best known for his "birds of whimsy," which he created over a career of forty-plus years. He is quoted as saying, "The subject matter of my work is birds, but the content is fantasy and humor." But not only was John an artist, he was a master of language and wordplay. The names for his pieces were as clever and colorful as the work. "Tequilla Mockingbird," "Rhapsody in Bluebird Garble Warbler," "Frizzled Headed Fernandina Dancer."

John said he wanted people to enjoy and appreciate sculpture, and for some people, he said, they needed a way of recognizing the art as "being" something. So he turned his abstract sculptures into birds, so everyone could find joy in them. He said the "sculpture" existed between the beak and the feet, but the beak and the feet helped make sense of the art for some people. John spent most of his career creating his flock of whimsical bird sculptures—each is categorized, counted, and curated—plus drawings, watercolors, and oil paintings.

Our Papa John will be greatly missed. Even in his final years, he kept his wonderful sense of humor and the twinkle in his sky-blue eyes. We cannot fathom that he is gone, but we know he is now in Heaven, playing his guitar and teasing everyone with his bad puns and one-liners. He was loved by many.

John was preceded in death by his half-brother, Billy Levin, who died as a small child and before John was born. John is survived by his wife of 56 years, Glenda Jane Horn Olsen of Pensacola; son Erik John Olsen of Pensacola and his fiancé Sharise; daughter Elka Olsen Carroll and her husband Perry Jonathan of Dallas,

Texas and their sons Alexander Van Fossen and Rowan Baker Carroll (born on Papa John's birthday); daughter Catlin Olsen Cibula and her husband Matt of Gulf Breeze, Florida and their children Whit Olsen and Larkin Jane Cibula. John is also survived by his best friend Herbert Ferreira of Pensacola. He is survived by cousins Barbara Olsen Chambers and Crissy Olsen of New Jersey, daughters of John's uncle, John Olsen of Stavanger, after whom John was named.

In lieu of flowers, if you would like, please send donations in John's name to **Loaves & Fishes Soup Kitchen in Pensacola, Florida**. John had a special place in his heart for this organization, on occasion playing the guitar there for the homeless. Send a check to **P.O. Box 1303, Pensacola, FL 32596** in John's name