



For Immediate Release
September 16, 2013

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Founder of 'Eppie's Great Race'

Restaurateur & Philanthropist Eppie Johnson Passes Away – 85 Years Old

Colorful and gregarious Northern California business leader and philanthropist Epaminondas “Eppie” Johnson, passed away in his sleep in his Sacramento home over this last weekend. He was 85 years old.

The proud son of a Greek family, Eppie worked for his father’s Sacramento fine dining house, after graduating from University of Nevada, Reno, before eventually striking out on his own and opening his first, “Eppie’s Restaurant” on 30th & N Streets, Sacramento. The popular family restaurant grew into a chain of “Eppie’s” restaurants located throughout Northern California.

The restaurant’s colorful owner was as (or more) popular than his “Eppie’s” Restaurants – continually introducing new, zany tricks, stunts, and campaigns to promote his restaurants.

“I used to drive down the freeway all the time,” Eppie commented to a local Rotary Club during a recent presentation. “I would look over to the car next to me, and I would see my face smiling back! All of the Eppie’s kids meals were printed onto masks, and kids would wear my face all over the place!”

Another famous restaurant campaign that earned him many fans was the “Professor Eppie” campaign. If students brought their report cards featuring straight, “A’s” into an Eppie’s Restaurant, Professor Eppie would give them a free chocolate sundae!

However, it was one specific, unusual, brilliant, “stunt” to promote his restaurants that ultimately became Eppie’s legacy to the Sacramento community – and raised over \$1 million to support programs benefiting the disabled.

In June 1974, while paddling in his kayak on the American River with Instructor Mike Ewing, Eppie Johnson was challenged to sponsor and launch a race that featured three different athletic events. No one had ever heard of a “Triathlon” at that time.

Now, 40 years later, “Eppie’s Great Race” – “The World’s Oldest Triathlon” – has become a signature event for Northern California, attracting over 5,000 participants, volunteers and spectators annually, to run, bike, and paddle on American River Parkway. Over the years, Eppie’s Great Race has also raised over \$1,000,000 for programs benefitting Sacramento County’s mentally- and physically-challenged. But in 1974, the concept of “Eppie’s Great Race” was simply entertained as a potential, fun, publicity stunt to promote Eppie’s restaurant chain!

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At that time, Eppie was an avid skier and all-around athlete, was intrigued by the idea of hosting a relay race featuring three different athletic legs. It was not unusual for him to perform curious, funny or athletic stunts within his own television commercials to promote his regional restaurants. His “Eppie’s” restaurant commercials often featured him personally carrying a tray of his food while on snow skis, water skis or running.

So, Mike and Eppie hatched a plan and selected the “perfect” potential race course in Sacramento to host a “Great Race” and promote Eppie’s restaurants: starting at Olson Drive where Eppie was building a new restaurant named “Eppaminondas” (Eppie’s actual first name) and ending at the “Eppie’s” Restaurant on Watt Avenue.

With that, Eppie decided the launch “Eppie’s Great Race.”

Simply implementing a three-phased race in Sacramento wasn’t as easy as it first sounded. Four days before the event, Eppie was called by a Sacramento Assistant District Attorney and the Highway Patrol Area Commander for an emergency meeting. Who knew he needed a permit? No one had ever done this before! Eppie quickly obtained a permit.

The challenges didn’t stop there. He was also told that if any bicyclist did not stop during the race for a stop sign or a red light on busy Watt Avenue, the cyclist would immediately be arrested! Eppie emphatically cautioned the bicyclists...and to his knowledge, none were arrested.

The entry fee for Eppie’s first, “Eppie’s Great Race,” was ten dollars, and there were only 138 participants.

On December 16, 1975, Eppie received the State of California Service Mark for the use of the name, “Eppie’s Great Race.” On May 12, 1981, he received from the United States Patent Office the Service Mark “Eppie’s Great Race.” Thus, the very first (and now oldest) annual triathlon in the world was inaugurated. Many exciting, famous and heart-warming stories have been generated during “Eppie’s Great Race” ever since.

For 40 years, Eppie’s Great Race has attracted hundreds of the world’s most famous athletes and celebrities to Sacramento. Among them included nationally known blind athlete Harry Cordelios. In 1976, Cordelios competed as an Eppie’s Great Race Ironman, and was the first blind athlete to finish the entire course. Chuck Lyda, an Olympic Medalist Kayaker, and his team won Eppie’s Great Race in 1986. In 1993, well-known paraplegic athlete Mark Wellman, who had previously climbed El Capitan and Half Dome in Yosemite, competed as an Ironman and dramatically crawled across the Eppie’s Great Race Finish Line.

Each year until the last ten of his life, Eppie led a “Great Team” featuring renowned sportspersons, luminaries, and regional business leaders. The “Eppie’s Great Team” sets the pace or the “time to beat” for Eppie’s Great Race competitors the following week. And anyone or team that beats the “Great Team’s” finish time is treated to a free breakfast at local restaurants.

Past “Great Team” members have included five-time Gold Medal Olympic Champion Eric Heiden; former Sacramento Mayor R. Burnett Miller; KCRA Anchor Deirdre Fitzpatrick; KOVR Anchor Jennifer Whitney; KTXL Weathercaster Pat Hambright; retired Law Judge Bob Hannah; Director of

Kaiser Sports Medicine Dr. Meredith Bean and Physician-in-Chief Richard Isaacs; McClatchy Company President and Chief Executive Officer Gary Pruitt; and founder and principal in the Boutin Dentino Gibson DeGiusto Hodel, Inc. Law Firm Stephen Boutin, among many others.

“Eppie’s Great Team” is often as entertaining as they are athletically gifted. For example, Olympic champion “miler” Peter Snell competed as the runner of “Eppie’s Great Team,” and upon completion, downed two 16-ounce glasses of beer at the finish line before a cheering crowd!

Eight years ago, Eppie launched a new element of his “Great Race.” To engage more children in healthy, physical activity, Eppie and U.S. Bank added the “Eppie’s Great Race Kids Duathlon.” Children ages 17 years and younger are challenged (as “Iron Kids” or in teams of two) to run 2.5 miles and then bike six miles, also along the American River Parkway. Last year, over 200 children participated in the Duathlon.

Also in the last ten years and much to Eppie’s surprise, his “Eppie’s Great Race” is no longer just a Northern California tradition; in fact, it isn’t even just an American tradition! A few years ago, Eppie’s Great Race went international! In 2003, three citizens of the Czech Republic (who now live in California and have participated in the race for over 25 years), decided to implement a very similar event in the Czech republic. For the last few years of his life, Eppie has been the official starter and has awarded medals to the winners of the annual Czech event known as “Epi Vodacky Triathlon.” Its proceeds are also donated to various charities within the Republic.

Eppie worked promoting and implementing his beloved “Eppie’s Great Race” until the day he died. This year’s, 40th annual Eppie’s Great Race attracted thousands of competitors, volunteers and fans. Eppie was able to donate more money to fund Sacramento County’s Therapeutic Recreation Services. The 41st Eppie’s Great Race is scheduled for Saturday, July 19, 2014. The “Eppie’s Great Race” Committee insist that the event will continue as planned.

“My Dad loved this community, and loved ‘Eppie’s Great Race’,” stated George E. Johnson, II, Eppie’s son and President of the Eppie’s Great Race Board. “He always said to me that he used to think the restaurants would be his legacy. But now we know, his legacy is the ‘Great Race,’ and hundreds of disabled people helped by the funds raised. My Dad loved life; and he lived a full and fun life! I’m proud of him and his legacy. More importantly, I’m proud to continue his legacy and his ‘Great Race’ for many years to come.”

Memorial arrangements are being organized now by the Johnson Family. The Family asks that in lieu of flowers, please send donations in Eppie’s honor to the Eppie’s Great Race Foundation: www.EppiesGreatRace.org.

Eppie is survived by his daughter Lisa Johnson Mangels, his son George E. Johnson II, his son-in-law Ben Mangels, daughter-in-law Molly Lee Johnson and his four grandkids: Alex Mangels, Claire Mangels, Athena Johnson and Epaminondas Johnson II.