

Late geophysicist Townshend the personification of serendipity

"He's the only person I know who sang at his own funeral," Jim Brader said after attending the Fairbanks celebration of life for his friend Jack Townshend, the geophysicist who died Aug. 13, 2012, at the age of 85.

As his recorded version of "My Way" echoed throughout the University of Alaska Fairbanks' Davis Concert Hall, Townshend reminded dozens of people of his tendency to break into song at the slightest encouragement. One of his favorite venues was the Carlson Center in Fairbanks, where Townshend would often sing after UAF Nanook hockey games.

"In the press conference room, he'd stand and sing. You are so wonderful to me," said Bob Downes at Townshend's service. "Many young Albertans (hockey players on the podium to answer questions about the game) have been stunned by that presentation ... But after they got to know the whole process it became part of their tradition."

Jack Townshend was never afraid to sing in front of strangers, maybe because he saw no one as a stranger.

By taking over his father's job with the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey when he was just out of the Army after World War II, Townshend engaged in a lifetime of recording precise measurements of Earth's magnetism. One of his enduring achievements was the establishment of a magnetic observatory on

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46 acres of UAF land in the late 1990s. Now known as the Jack Townshend College International Geophysical Observatory, the site features instruments that record the bread and butter of geophysical researchers — long-term data.

"There are hundreds of observatories in the world, but his was the best," said Syun-Ichi Akasofu, an expert on the aurora and former director of both the Geophysical Institute and the International Arctic Research Center. "He published (magnetic data) very quickly; people could see monthly reports."

"He fundamentally understood that you can't get there if you don't have the data," said former Alaska State Seismologist John Davies, who added that Townshend had a rare skill for getting funding for instruments or his observatory.

"Jack just wouldn't take no for an answer; he'd figure out a way for (funding agencies) to say yes," Davies said. "I think he honed his serendipity in those moments."

Serendipity — which Townshend defined as embracing important and beautiful unexpected

experiences — was one of his favorite subjects. He spoke about it at his Fairbanks office a few weeks before his passing.

"Every time I finished something, something beautiful showed up," he said in an interview conducted by UAF's Leslie McCartney.

"Like when there was an opening here at UAF for the College (International Magnetic) Observatory (in 1963). I didn't have a degree but William Wood gave me the job."

While his job was with the U.S. Geological Survey, Townshend was part of the UAF community for about 50 years, which equates to half of the university's existence. He and his wife Frieda raised their three children, Donna, Don and Brenda, in Fairbanks, with much of that time at the white cottage on campus that housed the magnetic observatory. Townshend touched many lives over the years — by picking up the tab for soldiers eating in his favorite restaurant, by giving spontaneous hugs and by sharing his message of embracing serendipity.

"Jack taught me to take that pause during my day, to be in the moment," his niece Lisa Townshend said at the celebration of his life.

"He taught me everybody was beautiful — everybody," said Telsa Flenaugh, hired by the Townshends less than one year ago to help out after Jack's cancer diagnosis.

In his final interview, Townshend explained how he



Carolyn Watson photo
Jack Townshend at the observatory named for him on the UAF campus. Researchers all over the world use data from the observatory to learn more about the mystery of Earth's magnetism and the aurora that affects it.

saw other people:

"I only look at someone as beautiful. I look beyond the mask, and know there's something beyond the physical body," he said.

"Regardless of what one's religion is, we are really spiritual beings, riding around in these bodies just

like me in my Lincoln Town Car out there."

A few weeks before departing on his last great adventure, Townshend said he was satisfied with where he was.

"The real success is in the journey, not the destination," he said. "I'm just on a

journey and I feel very peaceful."

Since the late 1970s, the University of Alaska Fairbanks' Geophysical Institute has provided this column free in cooperation with the UAF research community. Ned Rozell is a science writer for the Geophysical Institute.