



## Joel Charles Jennings

May 21, 1938 - June 28, 2023

Jennings, Joel Charles 5/24/386/28/23 Went home to be with his Savior, Jesus Christ, at age 85 while in the loving care of his wife of 62 years, Mary Lee Jennings (nee Russell). Joel and Mary Lee accepted Jesus as their Savior in the mid 1970s (Romans 10:9, John 3:16). Over the next almost-50 years, they spent much of their time, energy and nearly all of their resources supporting, serving, participating in, or leading various Christian ministries and missionaries around the world, including World Vision, Navigators, National Center for Fathering, CRU, Fellowship of Christian Athletes, Bible Study Fellowship, Young Life, Old Life, Heshima, Wooddale Church, Timberwood Church, Grace Church, Rotary and many others. He will be remembered by thousands for his kindness, gentleness and generosity. Joel grew up in Mountainside, NJ. He attended Jonathan Dayton high school where he was first-chair trumpet player in the school band and trumpeter in "The Stardusters", a 6 person for-hire dance band he formed with his high school classmates. The band charged \$20-25 for a 3 hour set, which was then split between the 6 of them. After graduating high school in 1956, he enrolled at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. While at the University, he was a member of the Alpha Tau Omega fraternity and Captain and MVP of the men's gymnastics team. Joel met his wife-to-be, Mary Lee Russell, at a fraternity social event in the Fall of 1959. He graduated in 1960 with a BBA in Marketing from The School of Commerce at the University. Joel started his job as a salesman with the Aluminum Corporation of America (ALCOA) in July 1960 in

Newark, NJ. He took leave from Alcoa to enter the Army in September 1960 and was stationed at Ft. Dix, NJ. He returned to Alcoa in the Summer of 1961 and married Mary Lee on 8/12/1961, the day before the Russians began construction of the Berlin Wall. While on his honeymoon, Joel was notified that his Army unit, the 411th Chemical Company, had been reactivated in response to the Berlin Crisis and would be sent to Ft. Bragg, NC. He took his second leave from Alcoa to begin his Army service on 10/15/61 at Fort Bragg, NC and was honorably discharged in late 1962. He resumed his career with Alcoa, serving in roles of increasing responsibility in Pittsburgh, PA; Chicago, IL; Detroit MI; and Minneapolis, MN. While working full-time in Detroit, he got his MBA in the evening through Wayne State University. He left Alcoa in 1972 to join National Computer Systems (NCS) where he was given the opportunity to run and turn around one of their unprofitable businesses, United Mailing Company. Joel was so successful turning United Mailing into a profitable business that NCS was able to sell it to another company in 1976. That same year, Joel was given the responsibility to turn around another poorly performing business that NCS owned, Gopher Athletic Supply, Co. in Owatonna, MN. At the time, the company was close to bankruptcy and consisted of a warehouse and office in Owatonna, MN, 3 retail sporting goods stores in Fridley, Bloomington and Owatonna, MN and a field sales team. After stabilizing the business, Joel found 2 other non-operating investors and purchased the company from NCS in 1979. Joel personally led the company to much improved financial performance by closing the retail stores, expanding the reach of the company's mail-order catalogs, and expanding the company's imprinted sportswear business. Joel changed the company's trade name to Gopher Sport in the mid 80s in response to the increasing importance of the company's imprinted women's sportswear business, which was then being sold in major department stores around the U.S. Joel later led the company out of the imprinted sportswear business to focus exclusively on selling products directly to schools through catalogs, websites and an inside sales and customer service team. After several decades of challenging but

successful growth, the other investors were able to successfully exit, and Joel became sole owner. Joel appointed a President to manage the daily operations of the company in 2003 so he could spend more time on philanthropy and serving on other organization's boards. He retired from the CEO role in 2012, retired from the Chairman role in 2016 and sold his remaining interest in 2019. Survived by his devoted wife of 62 years Mary Lee; children Wendi Moffly (Bill), Tracey Hagman (Eric), Jodie Jennings and Todd Jennings (Lorri); grandchildren Henry Moffly, Isabel Felt (h: Rene'), Willy Moffly (w: Emily), Sam Hagman (w: Erin), Simon Hagman, Addison Running, Holden Running, Todd Jennings, Chase Jennings, Jake Jennings, and great-granddaughter Zuri Hagman. Preceded in death by parents Louis and Florence of Boca Raton, FL and brother Richard Jennings of Charlottesville, VA. Upcoming memorial service scheduled for Friday, 7/14/23 at 11 AM at Wooddale Church, 6630 Shady Oak Road Eden Prairie, MN 55344. Washburn-McReavy.com Edina Chapel 952-920-3996

# Previous Events

## Church Service

JUL 14. 11:00 AM - 12:00 PM (CT)

Wooddale Church  
6630 Shady Oak Road  
Eden Prairie, MN 55344

# Tribute Wall

CP

“ Hoping being better late than never, Carroll Ann Pera will send this belated and perhaps duplicated message to Lee. Joel and Mary Lee were at my dear late husband Nathan;s funeral back in 2014 in Memphis .....Joel and Lee were sources of great comfort during that visit at our home and during the services.....they came all the way from Minnesota to be with me and children Nathan IV (wife Melissa) and Kirah (husband Fred Ramage). Hoping Mary Lee can get this .....memories that never die.....young couples with two small children in the 1960's in Chicago suburbs...have sent messages to clippyj email but not sure went through...

Carroll Ann Pera - November 16, 2024 at 10:36 AM

MJ

Thank you Carroll Anne... so many memories!! New email is clippyj@icloud.com

Mary Lee Jennings - August 09, 2025 at 09:34 AM



“ As one of several state directors for the Minnesota Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA), I have many fond memories of Joel and great appreciation for his generosity, wisdom and friendship. While Joel was interested in the numbers, he was far more interested and moved by the stories of changed lives within the FCA ministry. Joel accepted my invitation to attend an FCA huddle one Monday night. Walking out of that exciting and uplifting experience, Joel said to me, “Now I remember again why I love FCA!” This tender heart is what I remember most about Joel.

Glenn Martin - July 13, 2023 at 10:10 AM



“ *Serene Reflections Bouquet was purchased for the family of Joel Charles Jennings.*



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July 12, 2023 at 02:50 PM



“ *Mary Lee and family - on behalf of the Beyond Limits College organization and board we send our heartfelt condolences. Our organization has benefitted from your service and commitment to allowing us to serve college age students with disabilities for the glory of God. Our prayers are with you. Sincerely - Craig Spofford, Executive Director*

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**Craig Spofford** - July 11, 2023 at 02:46 PM



“ *Sweet Tranquility Basket was purchased for the family of Joel Charles Jennings.*



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July 06, 2023 at 02:34 PM



“ *Beautiful in Blue was purchased for the family of Joel Charles Jennings.*



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July 06, 2023 at 01:07 PM

BR

“*Mary Lee, my very first memory of meeting you and Joel takes me back to the 60's at the home of Debbie & Mike Buck. That is the first time in my life I laughed as hard as I did seated across the table from you at dinner party (we were dressed up, me in a flappers' outfit along with a sparkle head band and feather). We ordered from a dinner menu written in many foreign languages, needing everything from plates, glasses of water to food and salt and pepper and were served in the order of our choices. None of us knew exactly what we ordered. You and Joel kept Bob and I laughing so hard I dropped my head forward and the table candle set my feather on fire. You went into my 'favorite fun people column' right then when you reacted to my dilemma, and our paths have continued to cross so many times throughout the years. I always felt joy when I thought of the two of you but right now I feel sorrow for your loss of your lifetime love. But because we have known for most of our lives that earth is not our true home, we can look forward to rejoining our guys when God says we have also completed the journey He has set out for each of us here on earth. And I have to believe there will be laughter in heaven as well as more joy than we can now imagine. Praying our God and your many friends are there for you now, giving you strength and comfort in the days ahead. May He continue to bless you and hold you close. 💕Barb Rae*

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**Barb Rae** - July 02, 2023 at 01:01 PM