

Queen Anne News

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Remembering one of Queen Anne's boys of summer

By Jeff Bond

Editor

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The remaining members of the old gang gathered at St. Anne Catholic Church on Saturday morning. Despite the crisp day and threat of rain, many in the crowd were thinking about baseball.

But it wasn't any current team on their minds. They were thinking of the baseball of their youth more than 50 years ago, when they would win championships and be bonded into a friendship that would last a lifetime. It had made them a band of brothers.

Today was a solemn occasion. These men with their own families and successful careers had gathered to say goodbye to Greg Gardner, the latest member of their close-knit group of childhood friends to pass away all-too soon.

A Queen Anne native, Gardner died recently after a long bout with cancer in his adopted home of San Diego.

His friends and family had gathered in Queen Anne to remember their childhood friend who they palled around with on the streets and playfields of the neighborhood. They virtually lived at the old Queen Anne Field House, playing every sport that came along, from little league baseball to ping pong. They played on a number of teams together back in the 1960s when baseball was king.

Many members of this group, including famed shortstop Johnny Varga, were part of the Queen Anne High School team that won the 1969 Metro League championship. It was the only championship ever won by Mel Waite, the winningest baseball coach in Metro League history. Varga went on to be signed by the New York Yankees and play major league baseball.

Some members, including Scott Stevens and Gardner, were part of the team that won the city championship in flag football when they were in seventh grade. In fact, Gardner caught one of the winning touchdowns from Vargas, the team quarterback.

"We were our own rat pack and Greg was our Frank Sinatra," said Craig "Smitty" Smith of this group of friends.

Gardner was remembered for his encyclopedic knowledge of sports facts; his mistrust of technology and great sense of humor; his literary letters of complaint to both public and private organizations; his penchant for finding just the right card, his constant support of friends and, of course, his love of the Beatles.

Smith recanted how, after seeing the Cirque de Soleil production, "The Beatles Love" show in Las Vegas, Gardner sent him a special card to commemorate the moment.

"Smitty," the card read. "I can die now. I've been to the promised land..."

In 1985, Gardner moved to San Diego, but he never lost touch with his old friends, who he would meet for regular trips to favorite sporting events.

Greg Pease remembered taking Gardner to his first game in Yankee Stadium and having to fill him in on the facts of life in the House that Ruth Built. This included the fact that you don't sit in your assigned seats, if you can help it. With Pease's guidance, the two ended up sneaking down and finding two open seats right next to first base.

Touching words of remembrance were spoken by Gardner's devoted sister, Susan Gardner Lucier, who spent months nursing Gardner as he fought the illness. Gardner's uncle, Frank Gardner, seemed to sum up the sentiment at the service by saying, "Greg was a good man, he was my favorite nephew and he was a good friend."



The gang was back together not long ago for a last hurrah. From left is John Varga, Marc Pease, Greg Gardner, Greg Pease, Scott Stevens and Craig Smith. Somehow, the jerseys still fit.



The beginning of the "band of brothers," as they pose for their Little League baseball pictures in the early 1960s. Gardner is on the far right of the first row.