

EIGHT BELLS FOR CHARLES FIFE A VISIONARY LEADER

By Deb Heisler

Charles (Charley) Fife, a visionary leader and passionate sailor, passed away on January 4, 2022, from COVID 19 complications. He was 76 years young.

After joining in 1985, and like many new members of the 1980s, Charley Fife jumped right into AYC as an eager volunteer. He started as the Cruising Captain on the AYC Board of Directors and gave tirelessly for seven years, all the while helping to make the AYC foundation a little sounder. In addition, Charley and Debi, his wife of 40+ years, served side by side in many club activities.

Born in Flagstaff on September 2, 1945, Charley was a lifelong resident of Arizona. He served in the National Guard and was trained as an Assault Helicopter pilot for the Air Calvary, with his unit assigned to Viet Nam from 1967 to 1968. He was a recipient of the Purple Heart medal.

Charley is survived by his wife Debi and daughters Jeanne and Bonnie. They will host a celebration of life in the fall.



1985 – Joined AYC
1986 – 1988 Cruising Captain
1987 – Organized the 1st Tall Cactus Regatta with Mike Ewen at Roosevelt
1988-89 – Rear Commodore
1989-90 – Vice Commodore
1990-91 – Commodore
1991-92 – Jr. Staff Commodore
1992-93 – Sr. Staff Commodore
1993-June/July – Roosevelt Lake Captain

Married in 1981, Charley and Debi enjoyed being partners in every aspect of their lives. Charley began Auto International, an auto repair business, 49 years ago after some of the city's elite Alfa Romeo and Ferrari owners approached Charley to maintain their cars. According to Arizona Alfa Romeo Owners Club members Charley's dedication to and knowledge about Alfa Romeos was recognized worldwide. For more than 40 years, Charley and Debi were always available to help with any problem anyone had with their Alfa.

You probably don't know this, but a vehicle brought Charley and Debi together; she owned an Alfa Romeo, and he was the business owner that provided repairs. The rest is history – 47 years worth.



Despite having a full-time business with clients worldwide, this couple made time for the many other things they enjoyed: biking, hiking, bird watching, star gazing, and sailing. Debi shared that Charley rode his bike to work for 35 years, pedaling 8.5 miles each way.

In addition to serving on the AYC Board, Charley started AYC's junior sailing program that sailed on Chapparral Lake in Scottsdale. He was assisted by Debi, Doug Beland, and his now ex-wife Kim. During an AYC cruising event to Catalina, Charley met Sam Sabot, and he became instrumental in getting AYC the boats needed for the Junior Sailing Program. The Fife's utilized their shop to build a custom trailer to haul the 6-8 Sabots starting with a trailer base donated by member Gene Walentiny. This custom trailer allowed junior sailors to participate in West Coast and other events.

In 1987, Charley was awarded the coveted Blunder Bucket Award for falling off his boat within 10 feet of the finish line during the last race of the Fall Series. Unfortunately, he lost the series and his fleet's championship in doing so. Not his best day on the water!

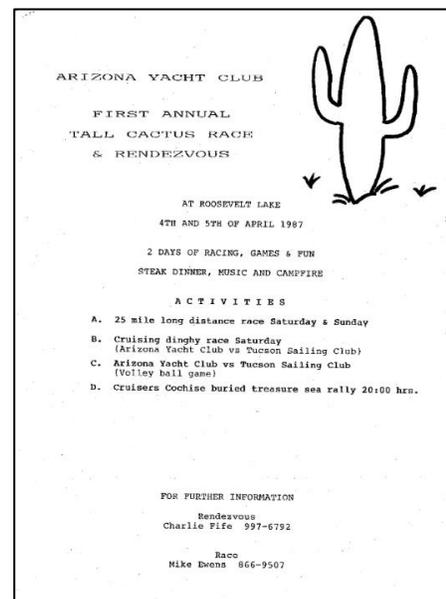
In 1988, Charley was the first recipient of the US Sailing Sportsmanship Award. This award was given mainly as MVP recognition to someone who made outstanding contributions to the Club at the local level. Charley certainly did that.

A little over a year ago, I chatted with Charley about his days as Cruising Captain and the beginnings of the Tall Cactus Regatta. Charley shared that the vision for the Tall Cactus was to get people together – racers with cruisers and cruisers with racers – so everyone could learn from each other. And he carried that vision forward when he began promoting and attending regattas in Mexico.

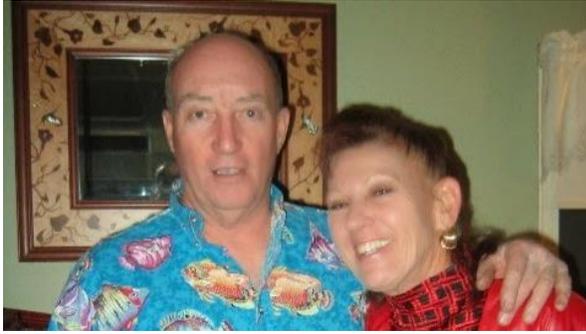
He shared that at one of the initial Tall Cactus Regattas, maybe the first, they went through 200 lbs of ice, two kegs of beer, 150 steaks, and over 100 donated gifts. They had to develop creative ideas for awarding all of the donated items – a beer bust was mentioned, but I failed to get the details. He was proud of all their acquired gifts and said almost every sailor went home with something.

I asked Charley how the trophy came about, and he said the Bean Pot Trophy idea came from the fact that they had a large pot of refried beans for the cookout. It was decided that the winner of the dinghy competition between the Arizona Yacht Club and Tucson Sailing Club would have the honor of cleaning up the pot before taking it home. The winning Club had to bring the pot back next year, full of beans, for the Saturday night dinner. The trophy bean pot was engraved with the winning Club's name.

Charley also mentioned a leftover Pinata they used for a Junior Regatta at Lake Pleasant. He recalled that "when the kids broke that thing open, it was filled with adult items, like packets of neon condoms. When the adults realized what was inside, they scrambled to snatch them up before the innocents started to open them and ask questions."



Joyce Seale found this 1st Annual Tall Cactus announcement in a 1987 Compass Points.



Charley & Debi - always together.

On a recent phone call with Debi Fife, she shared the following stories and thoughts about Charley and their time in the Club.

"We were best of friends with Tom and Carol Ohlin. The people in the Club were like our second family.

"One year, we went down to Mexico for a regatta. Driving back with boats in tow, several of us got caught behind a Pepsi distribution truck. That truck went off the road spilling its cargo of bottled sodas everywhere. It was on our vehicles and boats. Luckily

no one was injured, but many of us got flat tires from the glass. Then the police made all of us stay in a holding area until the accident could be investigated. It was a sizeable dump-like lot complete with dead animal carcasses. We were stuck there most of the week with that sticky pop on everything. Then the bees showed up, and then we ran out of food. People needed to get back to work! Luckily, the Pepsi company in Mexico cut a check to pay for the tire damage, and we were glad to be released and finally head home.

"We still have our boat Beamreacher. You know a beam reach is the fastest point of sail on a Santana 23k, and that is how our boat got her name.

"Charles was always benevolent in helping others sailors and as a business owner. He believed what goes around comes around. So many people will miss him. Everybody has been so considerate to email, text, or leave messages regarding their sympathy. Thank you all!"

Remembrances

Dennis Lynde

Charley and Debi were formidable competitors who stuck by the rules religiously and were instrumental in moving the club racing to Roosevelt lake while Lake Pleasant water was lowered to build the new dam and facilities along the shore. We were pretty much locked out for sailing on Lake Pleasant for those years but had a great time at Roosevelt, except for the time it snowed for the Birthday Regatta. Charley and Debi sailed Beamreacher, a very fast boat, and he also crewed with Mike Ewens on his Olsen 30. Charley was instrumental in getting Joyce Seale appointed as Rear Commodore, thus leading her into being to first female commodore of the Arizona Yacht Club. He was also an excellent mechanic and did awesome work on some of our boats.

I am very saddened to hear of the passing of Charley Fife. He was a friend, an outstanding competitor, and an awesome member of AYC. I'm very sorry, and my condolences to Debi.

Patty Rosky

I haven't seen Charley or Debi for years, but I have such fond memories of them both. I remember Charley teaching me how to tie a couple of 'critical' marine knots when we rafted up at Lake Roosevelt during racing season. I think it was the 2nd time I was sailing my Montgomery 15. At the end of the weekend, he was surprised I had actually 'practiced' and learned what he taught me. I don't know why he was surprised. But, it sure was fun. I always thought of his lesson when I tied any knot. I will also never forget when I saw Charley's mast bend in two while racing with AYC on lake Pleasant, and it was WINDY. It was really weird to be on the Spinnaker Bank overlooking the lake...and see that big boat coming towards shore with the mast bent in two.

My thoughts are with you Debi. And, I'm so sorry for loss. What fun you both had together.

Will Nowak

While it's been some time since I've seen Charley, I have fond memories of him from years ago. Charley was always very helpful and supportive when I was growing up as an AYC Junior in the late 80s and early 90s. As a kid, I recall sailing with him and Debi aboard their Santana 23 "Beamreacher" in the always-windy Lake Havasu London Bridge Regatta. It was the first time I had raced on a spinnaker boat, and after a couple of knockdowns and quick sprints down the lake to Havasu Springs, I was hooked. Rest In Peace, Charley.

Dave Nowak

Sad to hear of Charley's passing. I have fond memories of sailing with Charley and Debi in San Carlos and up at Roosevelt Lake.

Joyce Seale

I was lucky to follow Charley through the chain of Rear, Vice, Commodore and Staff Commodore!

We first served together on the AYC Board in May 1987, Charley as Cruising Captain and me as a Two Year Director. I then got to know and appreciate Charley for six years on the Board. During this time, we struggled with Lake Pleasant's lake levels due to building a new dam, racing at Roosevelt Lake, and starting to make a presence at Tempe Town Lake, which was in its development stage.

Our Juniors program was ramping up and it seemed like we were a much more dynamic club during that time with sails billowing in many waters. But through it all, Charley along with his lovely Debi, smiled and kept working to make AYC the Club it is today. Charley challenged us to look beyond Lake Pleasant and introduced many to cruising in Mexico. He also created the Tall Cactus Regatta! But I was unsure whether to hug or kick him when he introduced me as "Commodorable".



Picture of the 2nd Tall Cactus Regatta shirt.
From the T-shirt archives of Joyce Seale.
1989

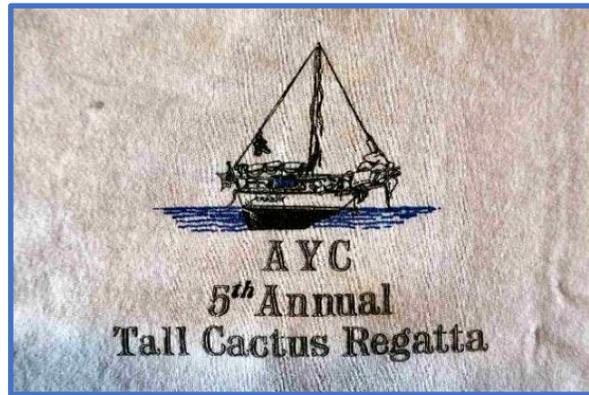
Marting Lorch & Debi Fife

Debi shared, "Martin Lorch crewed with us on Beamreacher during a Lake Havasu Thanksgiving Regatta and we set a record for the fastest downwind time with a spinnaker."

Martin added, "I remember that well. It was an overnight race down the river, traveling about 17 miles south of Lake Havasu. We raced down, docked for the night on the California side and raced back the next day. We had a beautiful spinnaker leg and taught Charley and Debi the proper way to fly and trim the spinnaker. It was a very fun event. Charley was a great man. He was never shy about sharing his opinion."

George Sheller

This is sad news. Charley was engaged with the Club for a long time. He and Debi conceived the Tall Cactus Regatta, and the first one was sailed at Lake Roosevelt.



Jim Pinter sent this picture from the front of the 5th Annual Tall Cactus Regatta t-shirt.

Thanks for the memories and your contributions to AYC Charley!
~ Fair winds ~

