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Kenny

by Carla Durbin and
Terry Draut

Kenneth (Kenny) G. Sterner passed from this world on Tuesday, September 15, 2015. He did so reluctantly, fighting a heroic battle with optimism and grace. His family and friends, whom he spent his life serving, were faithfully by his side.

Kenny's life journey began in Arlington Heights, Illinois on August 13, 1946. He was the first of four children born to Norman and Margaret (Peg) Sterner. They lived on the northern edge of a rapidly enlarging greater Chicagoland when cornfields still peppered the landscape.

His early youth found him totally immersed in falcons and falconry. As a teenager in 1963, he attended his first NAFA meet in Centerville, South Dakota. Kenny brought his immature redbtail, Tiercy. For the next 36 years, Kenny and Tiercy were more than a falconer and a hawk. Kenny loved that bird – the feeling was mutual.

In the early 1970s, Kenny, along with his friend Karyn and her daughter Carla, headed west to the farm country of the Rathdrum prairie in Hayden, Idaho. A pioneer toddler in this western trek, Carla's devotion to "her dad" was unshakable. The little girl from the 1970s grew to become wife and mother, raising three children who knew Kenny as "Grandpa." In 1990, Kenny moved to the open, sunny skies of Sheridan, Wyoming. He had, at last, found his "home."

Kenny's professional trade as an electrician led to the purchase of an electrical component company, O.A.Windsor, which he operated for 35 years. Being self-employed, Kenny was able to pursue his passion for falconry. In Sheridan, he was a valued collaborator with established falconers and breeders. He lived, breathed, flew and bred falcons. He raised hundreds. His cast of gyr/peregrine hybrids, "The Boys", were successful gamehawks and a YouTube world-wide sensation. These experiences led to travel throughout the US, Europe, Mexico and the UAE, adding new perspectives to his falconry as well as lifelong friendships.

Kenny served in the United States Army as a less than enthusiastic draftee during the late 1960s. However, he did his duty and was honorably discharged. In 2014, Kenny underwent a quadruple bypass at the Veteran's Affairs Hospital in Denver. Despite an initial successful recovery, within a few months he began to suffer memory lapses. He was eventually diagnosed with Creutzfeldt-Jacob Disease, a devastating brain disorder for which there is no cure.

Terry Draut and Kenny were best friends for over 50 years. They met when they were in junior high school. Both shared an interest in birds as at the time both were raising pheasants.

Their introduction to falconry was simply by chance. One day Kenny, John Ebel, Marty Lewandowski, and Terry saw a man flying a falcon in an open field in their hometown. The falconer was Ed Fitch. The rest is history. "Mr. Fitch" became their mentor. Although they then didn't realize it, their lives would never be the same. Even at this young age Kenny knew that falconry would be the great passion for the rest of his life.

For the ensuing years falconry took center stage in their lives. It became the glue that held their group together. Trapping hawks,

hunting with hawks, going out West to get young Prairie Falcons, they did it all. Kenny was always in the lead.

Kenny's house was "ground zero" for falconry related activities. They shared fond memories of all night "waking parties" where the goal was to get freshly trapped Redtail Hawks quickly manned and eating from the fist. They didn't know which was more tired in the morning: they or the hawks. But for 14 or 15 yr olds, nothing was more fun.

Before they could drive, Kenny's mom would supply the "wheels" for road trapping. Mrs. Sterner drove the rural roads, her old Plymouth packed with kids looking for a hawk to trap. On one occasion they caught a Kestrel after persuading Kenny's younger brother, Donnie, to loan them his pet mouse to use as bait.

Frequently, Mrs. Sterner brought home a "road kill" squirrel that she had picked up while running errands. This proved beyond a doubt that Kenny's mom was really cool.

The fondest memories during this time were the yearly fall raptor migration and trapping hawks. Early on, they learned that for best results they needed a trapping site on Lake Michigan - the closer to the Lake the better. Kenny, as usual, took the lead. Primarily through his efforts in the fall of 1965 they built a blind on Homer Miller's property in Zion, Illinois. This became the famous "Wooden Blind." It remains in use to this day.

Over the next several years this blind became a legend to the local falconry community. They trapped hundreds of birds - Sharp shins, Coopers, Goshawks, Redtail Hawks, Marsh Hawks, Merlins, Kestrels, Peregrines. Kenny even trapped a Gyrfalcon. Fall migration was one of the highlights of their lives. Life never got any sweeter.

Kenny will always be remembered for his devotion to falconry and his support of the falconry community.

He served for years as the president of the Wyoming Falconers Association. Despite leaving Illinois in the 1970s, he remained in close contact with his friends from the "Wooden Blind" days. He was one of the founding members of the Great Lakes Falconers Association. At the Fiftieth Anniversary of GLFA, many of those members were in attendance. They traveled back to Illinois from throughout the county because Kenny had remained in contact and wanted to see them at a great celebration.

Kenny's passion for falconry continued throughout his life. His love for the sport and birds of prey grew stronger every year. Over the years Kenny made sure that he, Terry and Carla stayed in touch. This was really important to him and all are grateful to him. He was Carla's "Dad", Terry's best friend and is greatly missed.



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