

Jim Olsen survived the foster care system and now teaches and coaches

By: LaRAYNE WATTS

RHS grad Jim Olsen was born James Michael Turpin on November 22, 1941, in Longview Wash. He says, "There were already three other kids in the family with not enough money to feed and clothe them, so my arrival was not a blessed event. I cannot recall getting much support from my mother, and I have no memory of my father, so I looked to my older sister Patricia (Pat), brother Donald (Gary) Turpin, and sister Gail for guidance. Pat and Gary are both gone now. Gail, like myself, is a survivor, and I love her. Surviving in like is not difficult, but surviving with your humanity intact is everything."

Jim says that he and his brother were in the welfare/foster home system, moving two, three, or even four times a year. He says, "We would often find ourselves in the same schools over and over again, just living with different families each time."

Jim said that at Mrs. Parcells' group home/orphanage on, "I came under the tutelage of Mrs. Tolles. Her husband was the head of the organization that was responsible for placement of kids with foster families. I believe it was through her that Oscar and Eva Olsen heard about me and brought me in on a trial basis. The rest, as they say is history."

Jim graduated from RHS with a class of 60 students. He says that his time spent in the Raymond schools was a life altering experience for him. "When I entered that old building in the seventh grade, I was afraid of my own shadow, afraid to be involved, afraid of rejection," Jim explains. "I was quiet and painfully shy, and fear marked every moment of every day for me. By the time I graduated, I am sure that many of my teachers would have appreciated having the old me back instead of the of the sometimes sneering, sardonic kid who replaced him."

Jim states that he gained the confidence to try on different aspects of his personality. It was o.k. to try. It was also o.k. to fail. He says that he owes the teachers for that newfound confidence. He said, "In junior high it was Mr. (Jerry) Halpin. In high school it was Inez Simpkins, our librarian, who fostered my love of reading, and Dick Frazier, who showed me that teaching and learning can be fun."

Jim recently had occasion to recall the mentors in his life and as he says, "The list became extensive. Rudy and Sylvia Kalla welcomed a grungy little kid into there home and showed him how families were supposed to operate. Mary Lapinski was an exceptionally caring lady whose smile would brighten the darkest day. Gene Clements was my role model when I was a kid; I thought that he personified cool. Juanita Berbells was also kind and had time to listen to me."

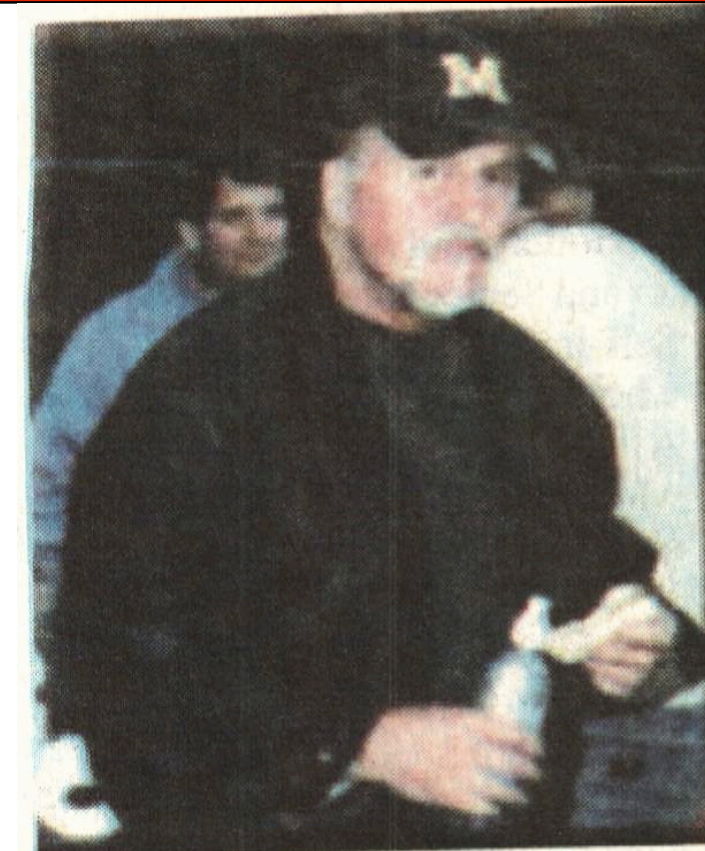
Jim played football in junior high school, first stepping onto a field in 1955. He says, "In the next football season, I will celebrate my 48th year on a field as a player or a coach. It would be a safe assumption to say that I like the game." He was also in the Junior Play in high school and says that took more courage than football ever did.

After high school and a four-year stint in the Air Force, Jim worked in the Boeing Computer Center for five years. During that time he got married and had two children. Then he decided to quit Boeing and went to Everett Community College to study English and play football. He says, "At that time I was, according to my coach, at twenty-nine years, the oldest college freshman football player in the U.S.!"

Jim is currently teaching and coaching football on Whidbey Island. His first wife died when their children were in high school. Jim says, "She was, I believed, irreplaceable. Eventually, however, I met another woman who would love my children as I do, and we married. My son was best man and my daughter was the maid of honor."

In May of 2002 Jim was taken to the hospital with what turned out to be a staph infection in his spine. It was a truly moving experience for him. He says, "After 38 days in the hospital and an all-too-close brush with death from a reaction to the medication, I realized how blessed I really was. I have a wonderful family that includes my two step sons. My family was there during the whole ordeal. Students and people I work with offered constant support and students organized prayer chains at their churches. Bob Berbells and Don Lapinski drove up to Whidbey Island to visit me."

Jim's advice to this year's seniors is, "Things don't matter. Stuff doesn't matter. We spend all of our lives collecting stuff, and when our lives are over, nobody wants our stuff. Our treasures are treasures to us alone. In love, in people, in relationships. Leave an indelible mark that can still be seen and felt generations from now. You can see that easily with the way you treat a child. Be kind, compassionate and loving. Learn how to work. Take responsibility for your actions. Most of all not to take yourself too seriously. None of us is getting out of this whole thing alive anyway. We might as well laugh."



RHS Alumnus Jim Olsen, 1960