

JOHN J. KATANA: A GOOD LIFE

Anyone who knew John Katana was saddened by his unexpected passing. For more than three decades John was the face (and voice) of the Pennsylvania Geographical Society (PGS), and members will recall his enthusiastic and entertaining presentations on a variety of topics, most notably his innovative “Geography of Sports.” John’s enthusiasm for geography drew many teachers to PGS, and he arranged workshops and paper sessions for those who joined our organization.



Likewise, John occupied center stage at the Pennsylvania Geographic Alliance (PGA) summer institutes and workshops. He was responsible for organizing and teaching the afternoon pedagogy sessions for teachers, and all who attended the institutes looked forward to John’s prize giveaways at the morning opening sessions. Coffee wasn’t needed as a wake-up stimulant when John took center stage. During the institutes, John awarded daily “GEOBUCKS” in various paper denominations to teachers who answered questions correctly or otherwise distinguished themselves during the daily activities. At the institute closing session, the GEOBUCKS could be redeemed for atlases, globes, and other teaching materials that John provided through the National Geographic Society and educational vendors. However, these activities were more than mere entertainment. John was a master motivator, and, by using a variety of activities and techniques, he very subtly and skillfully motivated teachers to perform at higher levels. In fact, John’s Geography of Sports course at the Indiana Junior High School was designed to motivate marginal students to improve their academic performance.

John received dozens of teaching and service awards during his career including those from PGS, PGA, the National Council for Geographic Education, the Chinese government, his school, the U.S. Department of Commerce, the state of Pennsylvania, and the Nystrom company to name a few. But, John did not seek personal recognition for his work. Instead, he lavished praise on his fellow educators by way of his Nystrom and Glencoe publisher awards. Most PGS members will recall John’s awards luncheons at the PGS annual meetings where he recognized teachers and professors for their academic accomplishments. For John the opportunity to serve the educational community and the discipline of geography was his ultimate reward. He believed that those who serve should seek no reward for doing their duty. John was a modest and caring person who put the interests of others above his own needs. Perhaps John’s life can be best described by the Roman philosopher Lucius Annaeus Seneca: “As is a tale, so is life: not how long it is, but how good it is, is what matters.” For many years I had the privilege and honor of working with the good man who was John J. Katana.

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