



Tribute to Fred Jayson:

Reflections From a Grateful Community

By Kenneth von Roenn

This past December I learned that Fred Jayson, my good friend of more than 50 years, had passed away after a sudden illness. Having recently spoken to him, I was initially shocked, as he sounded then as he always did, full of enthusiasm, as positive as ever, and still excited to go to work every day (!!!). But then I was reminded that he had just turned 100 years old in May and at that age illness and death often comes unexpectedly.

As I thought about our friendship over the years, I realized that there was a great deal of Fred's early life that I knew very little about. Recognizing that it could be some time before more than basic obituaries would likely be published about a man I had so admired and whose friendship I had greatly appreciated for so long, I realized that the only way to really learn more about Fred's life would be if I offered to research and write an article about his life story. Thinking that surely someone else better suited would be asked, I guess I was the lucky early bird. Not hearing a 'no thank you', I excitedly began to dig into Fred's background and found it far richer and more intriguing than I had ever imagined. So, I hope that you, the reader, will find his life story as unique and interesting as I have.

Born on May 14, 1921, in Karlsruhe, Germany into a modest Jewish household, Alfred 'Fred' Jayson's father was a bookkeeper and his mother a home maker. As a very young boy he displayed a strong proclivity for music, and it soon became apparent that he was in fact a true violin prodigy, performing his first solo concert at the young age of 12. As is common to most child prodigies, Fred was also extroverted, with a very high intelligence and a very strong work ethic. In time these traits would also contribute to his early mastery of English. These attributes no doubt contributed to his welcoming by the town's wealthy elite class, introducing him to a much wider world of art and culture.

The rise of Hitler began to drastically disrupt the lives of German Jews in the mid 1930's. Ironically Hitler had visited Fred's town at about the time of his first concert

Fred Jayson played 1st violin for the Houston Symphony under Efrem Kurtz, conductor. Picture is circa 1950. Photo courtesy of the Jayson family

“I met Fred while I was a young apprentice at the O’Duggan Studio in Boston—sent to S.A.B. on a glass buying trip in 1975 or so. He immediately welcomed me into the business and the family (then on N. Moore St. in NYC—he had a great convertible back then!)... Fred was always open, generous and happy to see me. And while he and Bendheim have always been supportive of my work over the years, facilitating and interested, I’ve cherished the times we spent discussing his music, travel and family— his love and dedication to those things shone brightly and steadily... I’ll really miss his phone calls, just to check in and share the latest... my heart goes out to all the family.”

—*Marianne Downs Behle,*
The Downs-Behle Studio

performance in 1933, ominously foreshadowing the events that would soon drastically change the world and Fred’s life.

In 1938, at the age of 17, Fred’s world as he knew it came to an end when he along with so many others were sent to a Nazi internment camp. That was soon followed on November 9-10 by the horrific event of Kristallnacht (Night of Broken Glass). Somehow, following that fateful day, Fred was able to lead his mother and three sisters out of Germany on to the last ship, headed to the U.S. On arrival they would reunite with Fred’s father, who had recognized the danger and come first to New York City to find a job and a home which were necessary to prepare all the documentation required to bring his family to America.

At that point in hearing these details about Fred’s story, I stopped to think about what it must have been like for a very bright, talented young man of 17 to escape with his family out of Germany, one step ahead of the Nazi Gestapo, to start a whole new life in a new country.

How terrified he must have been, as he watched his life disintegrate, as a prisoner facing potential death, then to endure an escape, followed by a difficult journey. And then, in the span of a few months, how jubilant he must have felt as he arrived in a dynamic new city that offered unbounded freedom and hope.

In New York, Fred’s musical abilities began to open doors for him once again. He was accepted as a student by Reuvin Heifetz, Jascha Heifetz’ father and original teacher. What an honor to have been in such rarefied company, for Jascha Heifetz is considered by many to be the greatest violinist in history, perhaps even equaling Paganini. No doubt Fred’s talent had to have been considerable.

It was sadly not long before his musical studies were once again interrupted, this time by the advent of WWII and his enlistment into the US Army. He served in Europe until the last days of the war, as it came to a close with the surrender of Japan.

After the war he returned to his music career, attending Manhattan School of Music on the GI bill and earning a Master’s degree in Musicology. After graduation he performed with the Houston Symphony in the honored position of first violin chair, before returning to New York. There he become reacquainted with a former fellow student at Manhattan School of Music, Walter Brewus. Walter was to be a dear friend for the rest of Fred’s life.

Besides music, the two young men also shared an appreciation for attractive young ladies. Though according to Walter’s 96-year-old memory, Fred seemed to attract the cutest and most desirable of them with his charm, striking good looks, “elegant mind” (Walter’s term) and an uncanny resemblance to the Hollywood heartthrob of the day, William Holden. Walter still seems to take the most pride though, in being the person who taught Fred to drive a car.

In 1951 Fred gave up bachelorhood and married Erna Bendheim. Erna’s parents, Sem and Margaret, had

founded S. A. Bendheim in 1927 as an import business specializing in specialty glass. Soon after his marriage, Fred joined Sem and Margaret on the management team of the company, at the time located on Horatio Street in Greenwich Village. They later moved to Hudson St in Tribeca. In 1965, after Sem passed away, Fred took over management of the company.

Fred’s charm and gregarious personality served him well in building Bendheim’s glass import business. His infectious passion for glass and the arts, combined with an enthusiasm and appreciation for the creative process of stained glass, endeared him as a kindred spirit to glass artists and artisans. Fred’s outgoing personality, combined with his earnestness and professionalism earned the respect and admiration of everyone who knew him. It still amazes me that in the more than five decades that I have been working in architectural glass art I have heard not one remotely disparaging comment about Fred. Rather, the consistency of what I have always heard was that it was his humility, sincerity and positive outlook that endeared him to everyone.

Not only did Fred step in to fill his father-in-law’s shoes very capably, he still continued to maintain his dedication to music. In the early 1960’s he traveled through Europe with his longtime friend and musical companion, Walter Brewus, performing throughout the continent. Walter’s musical career had expanded into organizing orchestras for some of the greatest performers of their time. So he hired Fred as well, for performances to accompany artists such as Tony Bennett and Smokey Robinson. Moreover, Fred played with a string quartet weekly, led by his former teacher at Manhattan School of Music, Rachmael Weinstock (referred to as ‘Rocky’ because of his penchant for fighting, in reference to the New York boxer Rocky Marciano).

All of this came to a sudden end in the 1980s when Fred injured his shoulder in a fall from a ladder which seriously affected his ability to play at an advanced level. Coincidentally, Jascha Heifetz also had an injured shoulder that had required surgery in 1975, when he

Fred Jayson and I had been associates and friends for over 50 years. He was a mentor to me when I started my career in the stained glass industry in 1967 but became a very dear friend as well.

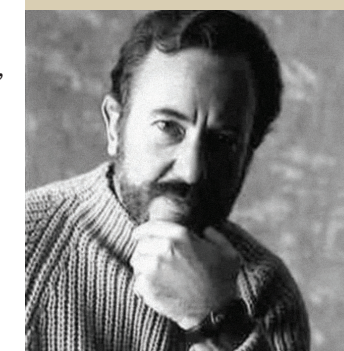
I recall during a sales call to my Minneapolis studio in 1974; he asked if it would be possible to arrange a meeting with Chester Weston of Weston Leighton Studios. Weston Leighton Studios created very high quality ecclesiastical stained glass from the mid '30s to the late 1950s. Chester and his wife, Mavis, who was a former glass painter for Connick Studios in Boston and operated her own studio (St. James Kiln), were happy to see Fred.

During the visit, Chester noticed that Fred was looking admiringly at a violin that was resting on the grand piano. Chester’s father had been a violin maker by trade and the violin that Fred was admiring was the last violin that Chester’s father had made. It had not been played since his father’s death decades earlier.

Fred shared with us that he had actually studied violin at Julliard and that before his involvement with S.A. Bendheim; he had played professionally in several symphony orchestras. Chester was very excited and asked Fred to play it for him. As Fred brought the violin to life, beautiful music filled the room. It was a very emotional moment for all us and Chester could not have been more pleased to hear that violin one more time.

This visit is typical of the care Fred had for others. I was proud to know him and thankful for his friendship.

—*John Salisbury*



Fred Jayson
in the early 1970s.
Photo courtesy
of the Jayson Family

My thoughts on Fred Jayson—

1982–1996, I had previously met Robert Jayson at a 1981 Ludwig Schaffrath class for which S. A. Bendheim was involved in producing. With the advice of Ludwig, and of course the urging of Robert, I decided to make my first trip to the 122 Hudson Street showroom/warehouse facility in about 1983. What a distinguished and stately building that was. While there, I was escorted around the showroom and warehouse by Robert and, at some time, introduced to Mr. Fred. He and I did not interact much on that trip, but I was impressed by Mr. Fred's friendly and welcoming attitude.

Subsequently, I made quite a number of other trips to Bendheim and I think I spoke with Mr. Fred each time and we became closer. He (and the other Jaysons) were just a joy to be around. Then, on around March 1999, I made another trip this time with, Anita Loomis, our office manager, and Truett George, another stained glass studio owner, to the facility in Passaic to pick out some new glass. When we landed, it was a dark and dreary day in Passaic! When we arrived at the warehouse around 10 am, it was still that dark, drizzly, snowy day that is so common up there. All of their color samples were on a rack in the window of the warehouse so they could be viewed with daylight, but there was almost none. Selecting glass colors is tricky, even on a sunny day, but on that day, it was especially challenging. Since we left Florida at about 0Dark30, around 1pm we started getting hungry, so Robert, Donald, and Mr. Fred took the 3 of us went to lunch at a restaurant close to the warehouse. It was a very nice place, but it looked like a set straight from *The Sopranos*—even including the group of highly dressed, bejeweled and cosmeticized ladies drinking across the room from us.

I remember most meals I have had when I am in a new place, but this time, it was the conversations that I will never forget. You know, it is difficult to eat when your face muscles are cramped up from laughing so much. The Three Jayson's told story after story—mostly all to do with the stained glass industry. And of course, Mr. Fred had some really great stories from decades before, many involving conferences of the Stained Glass Association of America.

After about two hours, I noticed that it was already getting dark outside, and both Truett and I still had more glass to select. So unfortunately, we had to end the lunch to get back to Bendheim. In retrospect, we should have stayed in the restaurant, continued our conversations/story telling (which had all indications of lasting well through the dinner hour), then spent the night and completed our glass selections the next day.

In 2016, SAB sponsored their "Transatlantic Glass Symposium". Maybe 40 glass artists from the US, but when I looked up, there was Mr. Fred, walking and bouncing all over the place, his arms raised pointing out various details, carrying on animated conversations with everyone. At that point, I said to myself "This is crazy. I can not let a 96 year old man make me look bad"! So I continued on with the tour. He was the inspiration to get me through the remainder of the trip.

After we returned home, almost every month or so, Mr. Fred would call. Initially he would be checking on my health—he was truly concerned. But later our conversations evolved into music, politics, and more stained glass history. His willingness to spend quality time, even if over the phone, greatly impressed me. And this was long after I had completely healed. On every phone call, my respect and admiration for him increased. Also, whenever I had an article published in the *Stained Glass Quarterly*, he would call to tell me how much he enjoyed reading it. What a kick in confidence that gave me.

It is probably not a good thing to judge people, but we all do. So anyone that ever knew Mr. Fred, would always place him at or near to top of any list that included the really important things: raising a great family, being a true friend, being a great businessman, having empathy with others, and making a lasting contribution to society.

Proverbs 22:6 says "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it"—Mr. Fred must have taken this to heart. All one need to do is just look at his legacy. His sons are the results those attributes will most likely will be passed on to his grandchildren. That is one of the best ways to measure a man's character and how he should be remembered—having a positive effect on all those he met. I was not the only one he treated with this respect.

He was a true gentleman and an Exemplar in the strictest interpretation of that term. I just wish I could have spent more time with him.

—*Jim Piercey*

Photo: Megan McElfresh

I started working at the Rambusch Decorating Co in the early 1960s as a stained glass designer and had to select / specify glass for each project I designed. If the studio racks lacked the colors needed the choice was Leo Popper or S. A. Bendheim Co. However Leo Popper did not last long so it was a hop onto the 14th Street subway down to North Moore Street (with it's intense aroma of spices from the adjacent warehouses) and into the Bendheim building to spend time with Fred looking for glass. At that time it was quite a project because there was no color palate system and it was a matter of hunting through crates, pulling sheets, and propping them in odd windows to compare. During this process Fred was most patient and accommodating and over time he realized a new system needed to evolve (thus movable sample racks of glass in stock). For me it was a welcome diversion from RDC to spend time with Fred searching for glass. It was he who helped to foster my appreciation for Lamberts glass. He was a great promoter but in gentlemanly way.

Years later I moved upstate but always looked forward to a trip down to SAB (which had moved to NJ) to acquire glass for a current project. Even when the younger generation took over the day to day running of the business and I worked with his son Robert, Fred would be there helping in some capacity. He never missed a day. We would spend some time on catch up, discussing family, music, work, colleagues, glass, Lamberts, anything really. He often would make a phone call out of the blue just to say hello and see how things were. His was a genuine interest and his warm generosity of spirit will be missed.

I will always remember him with great affection.

—David Wilson

was 73, negatively affecting his playing, and ultimately leading to his retirement from performances.

Fred's sons, Robert, Donald and Steven began working at Bendheim during school vacations, learning the business from the ground up. Fred groomed the boys to one day take over the business, demonstrating his confidence and trust in them. In commenting on their introduction to the management of the company, Fred said, "It was natural... I realized that, although I still felt fully capable to run the organization, it was time to pass the reins to younger people who had new ideas and youthful strength. Each one of my sons has distinct qualities. They each bring something into the business, a unique thought process, which is a great part of our strength."

What I find especially interesting about Fred's willingness to bring his sons into the business and to share responsibilities with them, is that it demonstrates his humility, and the lack of any desire for personal recognition for Bendheim's success. As he said, "I'm humbly proud of my sons' accomplishments. They took the business far beyond what it had been, and made it international."

This transition was especially significant because of the changes that had begun in the world of architectural glass art at that time. By the 1980's stained glass had begun a slow decline for many reasons, among them changes in aesthetic fashions in favor of the growing importance of technical concerns.

Correspondingly there began to be an emerging interest by architects and designers for glass types that were more visually interesting and fit aesthetically within the context of contemporary architecture. Bendheim was very well poised to address and serve this market shift as the business specialized in stocking literally thousands of unique glass types. The Jayson brothers were keenly aware of these changes and began thinking and planning with their father as to how Bendheim could offer glass to meet a wider range of applications and aesthetic choices.

Fred and his sons created a new type of glass supplier, one that provides products and services beyond those of simply a glass distributor. Robert, Donald and Steven developed new ways to offer a wider range of specialty glass in building safety form through expanding into processes such as tempering and lamination. This set Bendheim on a new course of expansion, now moving into production, complementing the importing and distribution components of their business.

After years of planning, this venture into fabrication led to the launching of Bendheim Wall Systems Inc. in 2001 and the introduction of Lamberts® channel glass. The Lamberts glass premiered with the groundbreaking Nelson-Atkins Museum in Kansas City, designed by the renowned architect, Steven Holl. Bendheim Wall Systems has since added to their Lamberts high-performance translucent channel glass system, first with the introduction of a glass panel cladding system (rainscreen system) which can be used in a myriad of applications including recladding, new construction, and projectable facades.

To accommodate all this expansion, Bendheim relocated from New York City to a much larger facility in New Jersey, where they will soon add digital glass printing to their growing array of services. Along with this relocation Bendheim has passed the reins of leadership to the family's 4th generation, with the election of Ben Jayson, Robert's son, to the position of President.

These changes of direction beginning in the 1980s were led by Fred's sons with his blessing and continual moral support. Donald Jayson refers to his father's role during this period of transformation as that of a 'cheerleader', emotionally supporting his sons in their quest to build the Bendheim brand into something much greater. In describing the company management philosophy, Fred and his sons credit their strong family bond, which transcends petty personal objectives for the greater good of the company.

From my 50+ years of working with Bendheim and the Jaysons, I can attest to the very apparent love each of them has for one another, and their shared pride in what they are building, together. This is not by accident: it was initiated, nurtured and sustained by Fred's leadership example and absolute trust in his sons.

Fred was much the same way with his friends, nurturing his many friendships with phone calls to stay in touch, on a regular basis. I always looked forward to each of my conversations with Fred. Even though in the past few years he often remarked at how many of his friends were dying, our talks were still filled with his enthusiasm and passion right up until he passed away.

In talking to so many people, family and friends alike, during the research for this article, I found that we all felt similarly about Fred. Our conversations with him left us all with a smile on our face and gratitude to have had him in our lives.

How we will all miss him!

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Fred Jayson circa 2016.
Photo courtesy of the Jayson Family