



Joel T. Johnson

July 9, 1936 - January 16, 2026

Joel T. Johnson, age 89, of Kearney, passed away on Friday, January 16, 2026 at CHI Health - Good Samaritan Hospital in Kearney. Funeral services will be held on Wednesday, January 21, 2026 at 10:30 a.m. at the Bethany Lutheran Church in Axtell. Pastors Marcia Dorn and Rick Carlson will officiate. Visitation will be on Tuesday, January 20, 2026 from 4:00 p.m. – 6:00 p.m. at First Lutheran Church in Kearney. Burial with military honors will be at the Bethany Lutheran Cemetery in Axtell. Memorials are suggested to the Joel & Jill Johnson Scholarship Fund through the University of Nebraska Foundation, First Lutheran Church in Kearney or Bethany Lutheran Church in Axtell. Please visit www.hlmkfuneral.com to leave a message or condolence. Horner Lieske McBride & Kuhl Funeral and Cremation Services in Kearney is in charge of arrangements.

Joel was born on July 9, 1936 in St. Paul, Minnesota to Rev. A.J. and Ida Johnson. He spent his early years in Marine, MN. He moved with his family to Nebraska in 1945. He graduated from Axtell High School in 1954. He attended the University of Nebraska-Lincoln for three years, and the University of Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha for four years, receiving his medical degree in 1961. He completed his surgery residency in 1966, also at UNMC.

He spent two years in the Navy following the completion of his surgical

training. He was stationed at the Oakland (CA) Naval Hospital for a year, and on the hospital ship the USS Repose for a year, where he cared for patients during the Vietnam War.

Joel and Jill (Nyquist) were united in marriage on June 21, 1958. They had four children: Eric, Elizabeth, Lynn and Karen. After Joel served in Vietnam, the family moved to Kearney where he practiced surgery until his retirement in 1999. In 2002, he was appointed to the state legislature and served until 2009.

He is survived by his wife, Jill, his son, Eric (Lisa) Johnson of Grand Forks, ND; and his three daughters, Elizabeth (Dave) Westesen of Kearney, Lynn (Ed) Fleming of Omaha, and Karen Johnson (JJ Winston) of Shawnee, KS; sister-in-law, Maryann Johnson of Rockford, IL; brother-in-law Jack Nyquist of Southport, CT; grandchildren, Sarah (Ryan) Haack, Laura (Aaron) Pullmann, Jacklyn (Brian) Norman, Nicole (Eric) Chaykovsky, Anna Fleming, Victoria Fleming, Erik (Cherry) Johnson, Lindsey Johnson, Jeremy (Sydney) Heinert, and Zelda (Demyx) Ramos, seven great-grandchildren and a host of nieces and nephews.

He was preceded in death by his parents, his brothers, Alan, Daniel and David, and five sisters, Anne, Pauline, Linnea, Carol and Miriam.

Cemetery Details

Bethany Lutheran Cemetery

903 25 Road
Axtell, NE 68924

Previous Events

Visitation

JAN 20. 4:00 PM - 6:00 PM (CT)

First Lutheran Church ELCA
3315 G Ave
Kearney, NE 68847-3653
(308) 237-5544

Funeral Service

JAN 21. 10:30 AM (CT)

Bethany Lutheran Church
903 25 Road
Axtell, NE 68924

Tribute Wall

NS

“ Nicole S. planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of Joel T. Johnson.

Nicole S. - February 01 at 11:50 PM

BE

“ Jill, you may not remember me but I was one of Senator’s administration aides. Still to this day, I always remember when he would ask me to “make an appointment to have my ears lowered” and then laugh like it was the first time he ever said it. Or how he would neatly line up all the papers on my desk by the edges; that’s how I knew he had been in the office. Or how he always got so lucky with parking spots no matter where we went. Or how we anxiously awaited every home Husker game to see if he would give away his tickets to us staffers. But my favorite is when he would ask me to call his “bride”. He loved you so dearly!! I will forever be grateful for the opportunity he gave me. I will never forget him. All my best, Becky

Becky - February 01 at 09:44 PM

WG

“ Hard to add words that have already been shared. What a guy, what a man, what a friend. Husker football and Kearney Clinic brought us together but a lifetime friendship resulted. So many hours of sharing football, or all sports for that matter, and even the US Navy! Will never forget the conversations on road trips to Lincoln to see Tom, or go to the Outland presentations. Not to carrying Joel and Jill's mail for around 35 years. Will treasure his friendship forever! I was blessed to have him a part of my life. Jill and family you are all in everyone's prayers. God bless you all! Joel, thanks for being a part of all our lives! See you in Heaven!

Wayne Garrelts - January 23 at 02:57 PM

CB

“ Joel and Jill have been important to our family for so many years. Did it start when Bus and Bea were their Luther League sponsors in middle or high school? Joel was good to us - always - from farm hand to surgeon! Even when he hollered down the hospital hall, “Good morning Squeak” when I was with a group of student nurses trying to be their Professor!
Carol Bruce Ott, sister of Connie.

Carol Bruce - January 20 at 10:17 PM

KS

Dear Johnson Family,
Sending caring thoughts as you grieve your dad. I work with Eric at University of North Dakota School of Medicine and Health Sciences. If Eric takes after his dad, you were blessed with an amazing father! May the good memories bring some comfort and peace.
Kamille Sherman, MD

Kamille Sherman - January 21 at 02:55 PM



“ 1 file added to the album Memorial Tribute



Horner Lieske McBride & Kuhl Funeral and Cremation Services - January 20 at 12:16 PM

JH

“ Joel was a great leader and a great friend. During my time as Congressman Tom Osborn's District Director, Joel was a valued advisor. Some of my favorite memories were having Joel ride with me in our World War II Jeep in the Veterans Day parade.

John Hanson

john r hanson - January 20 at 11:25 AM

JD

Joel was my chief resident at UNMC in 1965 and started a life long friendship. He could legitimately be called MR NEBASKA, as every conversation we had Nebraska would be part of it. During our five years there we became serious HUSKER FB fans. Joel and I over the years had many conversations about the HUSKERS. We shall miss him greatly.

Jim Delavan - January 22 at 10:50 AM

JM

“ I am so sorry to read of Dr Joel's passing. I worked with him off and on for quite a few years, including when he went to Haiti with us. He was a very good and compassionate surgeon and a very good guy. My deepest sympathy to all of the family and prayers for comfort.



Joan Mickelsen - January 20 at 11:18 AM

LK

“ Love Kerry & Matt Kechely purchased the Dreams From the Heart Bouquet for the family of Joel T. Johnson.



Love Kerry & Matt Kechely - January 20 at 12:00 AM

LK

“ Love Kerry & Matt Kechely planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of Joel T. Johnson.

Love Kerry & Matt Kechely - January 20 at 12:00 AM

GS

“ I was editorial page editor at the Omaha World-Herald during the time Joel served in the Legislature. I have the highest respect for him. He approached his service as a state senator with exceptional dedication, energy and thoughtfulness. He spoke knowledgeably and effectively during floor debate. He ably chaired the Health and Human Services Committee. He understood how to use the legislative process effectively and fairly. He was a Nebraskan of character. I spoke with him regularly during those years, and once when I was traveling the state I stopped by to visit him at his cabin. Nebraska is a better place because of Joel's service as a physician and a lawmaker. I was blessed to know him as a friend and source of wise counsel. An admirable Nebraskan.

Geitner Simmons - January 19 at 09:25 PM

BH

“ Brian Cyre and CeAnne Harbin purchased the Beautiful in Blue for the family of Joel T. Johnson.



Brian Cyre and CeAnne Harbin - January 19 at 08:26 PM

KD

“ Dear Karen, Jill & Family - I was saddened to learn of Joel's passing. While I got to spend the most time with you, Karen, and your Mom during our growing up, I have a few memories that I want to share specifically about Joel. I remember the delicious rhubarb pie that he used to make - even the crust was homemade! And I remember his impression of Yogi Bear and BooBoo. These memories bring a big smile to my face, maybe as big as the smile I remember on your Dad's face when he was home & enjoying time with his family.

And in later years, I remember joining you and your parents a couple of times at McCormick & Schmick's for dinner in KC. But one of things I will forever be grateful for is when your Dad took time to talk with me on the phone, providing me with encouragement & support when my Dad was critically ill with sepsis in 2005. I will never forget, he said, "If I was a betting man, I would bet my money on Jerry." That meant so much to me! ❤️

I am thinking of all of you and sending my heartfelt condolences for your loss.

Sincerely,
Kim Denton-Hill

Kim Denton-Hill - January 19 at 08:23 PM

LD

“ Linda and Scott Dobry purchased the Beautiful Heart Bouquet for the family of Joel T. Johnson.



Linda and Scott Dobry - January 19 at 03:28 PM

MJ

“ Mary Ann, Jeffrey, Laura & Julia purchased the *Enchanted Cottage* for the family of Joel T. Johnson.



Mary Ann, Jeffrey, Laura & Julia - January 19 at 02:29 PM

KM

“ Kody and Toody Moffatt purchased the *Beautiful in Blue* for the family of Joel T. Johnson.



Kody and Toody Moffatt - January 19 at 01:56 PM

CO

“ Both of us thought so much of Joel
He was a great Dr: he took care of both of us when we needed him
Rodger and Colleen

colleengage - January 19 at 01:30 PM

RB

“ Robert B. purchased the *Beautiful Dreams* for the family of Joel T. Johnson.



Robert B. - January 19 at 12:31 PM



“ Beautiful in Blue was purchased for the family of Joel T. Johnson.



January 19 at 11:35 AM



“ Leslie F. planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of Joel T. Johnson.

Leslie F. - January 19 at 11:35 AM



“ Having served in the NE legislature with Joel he was a gentleman and very effective State Senator. Plus on a personal level Lori and I enjoyed time spent with Joel and Jill. Truly a life well lived serving his community and Nebraska. So pleased I had the opportunity to know him. With sympathy, Dave Pankonin; Louisville, NE

Dave Pankonin - January 19 at 10:13 AM



“ Claire Donahoe purchased the Simply Elegant S pathiphyllum for the family of Joel T. Johnson.



Claire Donahoe - January 18 at 10:58 PM

CD

“ Claire Donahoe planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of Joel T. Johnson.

Claire Donahoe - January 18 at 10:58 PM



“ Simply Elegant Spathiphyllum was purchased for the family of Joel T. Johnson.



January 18 at 03:40 PM



“ Simply Elegant Spathiphyllum was purchased for the family of Joel T. Johnson.



January 18 at 01:00 PM

LC

“ Lindsey, Erik and Cherry planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of Joel T. Johnson.

Lindsey, Erik and Cherry - January 18 at 01:00 PM

MK

“ Dear Jill and family,

We were sorry to hear about Joel and know the last years have been hard. Dad always considered him to be such a good, good friend, consistently loyal. May happy memories bring you all comfort as you continue in our thoughts and prayers.---Phil and Mary (McKinney) Kommers

Mary Kommers - January 18 at 11:28 AM



“ Beautiful in Blue was purchased for the family of Joel T. Johnson.



January 18 at 11:16 AM

TP

“ Tari Poorman-Maaske planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of Joel T. Johnson.

Tari Poorman-Maaske - January 18 at 11:16 AM

EW

“ Sorry for your loss. I know Joel made a huge impact on so many lives during his time on this earth. He led a life for which we can all be grateful.
Liz Wingler

Elizabeth Wingler - January 18 at 10:02 AM



“ *Simply Elegant Spathiphyllum* was purchased for the family of Joel T. Johnson.



January 17 at 08:55 PM



“ *Bill and Janet Winger planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of Joel T. Johnson.*

Bill and Janet Winger - January 17 at 08:55 PM