

PEOPLE

Anthony 'Biff' Johnson

By Jenn Rains

As family, friends and colleagues mourn the unexpected death March 24 of Leander City Manager Anthony "Biff" Johnson, many have reflected on the full life he led, the positive effect he had on others and the legacy he leaves.

"He would wake up every morning and say 'today is a beautiful day,'" said his wife, Serena Johnson. "He really meant that and he lived it."

Known for bringing a calming spirit to work and relationships, those close to him said Johnson worked hard but played hard.

"He was not a workaholic, but he got things done. He was able to get more accomplished by talking on the phone with someone," Serena Johnson said.

Round Rock City Manager Steve Norwood said there was never a dull moment with Johnson, whether it was on the golf course or at a work function. Norwood hired Johnson as public works director in Lancaster, Texas, in 1995, when Norwood was city manager there.

"We vacationed together, we went to conferences together and we played way too much golf together," Norwood said. "When it was time to have fun, [Biff] never came up short."

But, he knew how to take care of business and lead a city, Leander Mayor John Cowman said.

His work

Johnson began his career in Richardson, Texas, in 1978 as a waterline repairman. Over the next 23 years, he worked his way through the public sector to become city manager of

Lancaster and then Wylie.

When Johnson took the helm of Leander, the city had been through 10 city managers in 13 years. Johnson's arrival provided "instant stability," Cowman said. That stability led to an increased bond rating.

Cowman said when Johnson arrived in Leander on Feb. 1, 2004, he began aligning the city and making decisions needed for the future of Leander.

"The staff he built and the council he helped shape will guide the future of the City of Leander. His vision will not be lost."

—John Cowman, Leander mayor, on Biff Johnson's impact on Leander

"He really took control of a city that was ready to aspire but didn't have the correct components until he arrived," Cowman said. "What he did for the city was provide a direction that none of us ever believed we could obtain."

Development Services Director Jim Bechtol said looking around Leander, Johnson's mark can be seen in the many buildings and developments that he helped bring, including the police station and fire stations.

"All those buildings are going to be the lasting memories of his legacy," Bechtol said.

Another lasting impact of Johnson's is the staff he put in place over his seven-year tenure, Cowman said.

"The staff he built and the

council he helped shape will guide the future of the City of Leander," Cowman said. "His vision will not be lost."

Serena Johnson said her husband believed hiring good leaders was the key to success.

"He always said, 'if you have the right leadership in place, it always comes together,'" she said.

Leander Economic Development Director Kirk Clennan, who also worked with Johnson in Lancaster, said one of Johnson's greatest strengths was the ability to balance situations and find common ground between two sides when no one else could.

He said Johnson was also not afraid to be tough in situations, if it bettered the city.

Johnson's expertise extended to other parts of Central Texas, as he helped with the Brushy Creek Regional Utility Authority, which will provide water to Cedar Park, Leander and Round Rock.

"Biff was able to draw on his experience from the North Texas region and present options and alternatives for consideration during the development of the [BCRUA]. In doing so, he was an incredibly important piece of the BCRUA dialogue," Brenda Eivens, Cedar Park city manager, said.

His character

While Johnson was dedicated to performing his job as city manager, he had the same dedication for his son, Drew, and all his friendships and relationships.

Known for always having a smile, he had a calming effect in situations, Norwood said.

"You could always count on one thing with Biff: He always



Anthony "Biff" Johnson served as Leander's city manager for seven years before his unexpected death March 24. Johnson helped the city prepare for future growth and fostered regional relationships to help Central Texas.

had a positive attitude and he always had a smile on his face," Norwood said.

He said being comfortable with people was important to Johnson.

"If he felt like he could trust you, you were golden. If he didn't feel like he could trust you, he would just kind of pat you on the head, give you the basics and send you on your way," Norwood said.

Many of Johnson's friends said his calm nature, willingness to help and ability to befriend anyone characterized his life.

"There was just a level of calmness in Biff that I've never experienced with other friends. Nothing bothered him," Bechtol said. "He was also a good friend and mentor who was always helping people through rough times."

Dan Shiner, police chief of Texarkana, Texas, said he and Johnson became friends while working together in Lancaster. He said what stood out most about Johnson was his willingness to interact with anyone, regardless of his or her station in life.

"Biff had friends and connections all over the place and everybody thought well of him. He couldn't go anywhere without making new friends," he said.

"His outgoing personality touched people everywhere," Shiner said. "Personally, it really is a huge loss. I really think Leander and the public sector have [also] really lost somebody of value."

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