

JOHN KEAST

Ladies and Gentlemen,..... tonight I have the pleasure of telling you a story about the master salesman, John Robert Keast. This story spans a period of some 75 years and it is a story of a quest. A quest - a search for something desperate - something evasive - something illusive.

During this quest many people are touched by this master salesman. But as often happens, many are blessed but him until.....and this is the story.

This evening I will talk about this wonderful individual who was and is.....and I will mix my adjectives and nouns.....

Summery:

- child performer
- singer
- inspiring extrovert
- full of confidence
- a natural attention-getter
- popular with the girls
- salesman
- farmer
- scrounger
- artist
- teacher of the young
- barterer par excellence
- explorer of the local countryside
- enthusiastic
- kind
- generous
- philosopher
- adventurer
- world traveler
- poet

I will open this evening by reading parts of a poem and I want you to think about this poem while I go through John's presentation. This is one of John's favourite poems

When I have a house...as I sometime may
I'll suit my fancy in every way,
I'll fill it with things that have caught my eye
In drifting from Iceland to Molokai
It won't be correct or in period style,
But....oh, I've thought for a long, long while
Of all the corners and all the nooks,
Of all the bookshelves and all the books
The great big table, the deep, soft chairs,
And the Chinese rug at the foot of the stairs;
It's an old, old rug from far Chow Wan
That a Chinese princess once walked on.

My house will stand on the side of a hill
By a slow, broad river, deep and still,
With a tall lone pine on guard near by
Where the birds can sing and the storm winds cry.
A flagstone walk with lazy curves
Will lead to the door where a Pan's head serves
As a knocker where like a vibrant drum
To let me know that a friend has come;
And the door will squeak as I swing it wide
To welcome you to the cheer inside.

For I'll have good friends who can sit and chat

Or simply sit, when it comes to that,
By the fireplace where the fir logs blaze
And the smoke rolls up in a weaving haze.
I'll want a woodbox, scarred and rough,
For leaves and bark and odorous stuff
Like resinous knots and cones and gums
To chuck on the flames when winter comes;
And I hope a cricket will stay around,
For I love its creaky, lonesome sound.

Sound familiar ??? John Robert Keast comes from parents in the south western area of Ontario

Parents:

- father - John Raymond Keast - family from the Grand Valley Ontario area just north of Orangeville
- father a life insurance salesman for Prudential Life Insurance Co.
- mother - Grace Irene Melenbacker - family from the Kitchener area (previously known as "Berlin")
- mother a piano teacher

Childhood:

Guelph - born in Guelph

- 2 children in the family
 - John Robert Keast - d.o.b April 09, 1923
 - Patricia Keast - d.o.b October 02, 1924 who is 1 ½ year younger

Elora

In 1934 when John was around 11 years old the family moved from Guelph to Elora a few miles away.

- lived in Elora for about 1 year where he attended public school and it was there that he took his very first art lesson.
- John also entered the world of public performing for he had a sweet singing voice (a boy soprano) and would sing often at school concerts
- John dressed in his finest shirt and short pants, accompanied by his mother on the piano would sing "dressed in gown of blue" or recite a poem "sweet astor"

Fergus

In 1935 at the age of 12 years the family moved from Elora to Fergus where they lived for about 4 years

- John hung around with a group of cool guys. Dave Flannery, Dave Howard, Dave Beatty, Clem Elliott and John was known as "Jackie Keast" They called themselves "The Headliners" - nothing modest about the name nor the guys. The Headliners was a big thing with these Fergus teens - it was a real friendship club. They all had type "A" personalities
 - these fellows caught the eyes of girls like the girls in the FJT Club including Jean Milligan the daughter of the Mayor of Fergus, Josephine Potter, Marr Muir, Margaret Fairley and Marjorie McFadzean
 - these fellows all lived up to their Club Name for during the war all of them became officers in the military.

Guelph: 1939

In 1939 when John was at the age of 16 years, his father was promoted as Prudential's manager of the Guelph area and they moved back to Guelph to live.

Military 1940

On September 01, 1940 John enlisted at the age of 17 years in the Canadian Artillery

Over the next 4 ½ years John was posted to Petawawa, Prince Rupert, B.C. where they built a camp in the heart of the tall timber (It was there that Clem Elliott died of a burst appendix); then back to Petawawa and then off to Oxted in Kent County, England

In 1944 young and anxious for action, John showed leadership qualities and was sent away for officers training and in doing so missed fighting on D-Day - much to his great disappointment

- John became a gunnery instructor
- John was promoted to lieutenant and assigned to the Pacific where he hoped he would find some action for which he was trained. While on a 30 day leave, he missed the ending of the war when the bomb fell on Hiroshima
- John will tell you that he has never fired a shot in anger

Discharged: 1945

In July 1945 John was discharged from the military. Both before, during and after the military John wrote poetry and one poem I would like to read to you has a military flavour to it and I have chosen to read it here. This was read to me and the telephone reception was not the greatest hence my rendition of this poem may not be accurate but it will be close. My apologies to John who, by the way, has a book of poems composed by him in safe keeping.

The Beginning

I stand head bowed beside your lifeless form,
And hear their muffled sobbing,
See their warm and living hands dismiss a swelling tear,
Bereft, they mourn, and turning disappear
Here, I alone, in scented stillness stand.

Sweet face that I have loved; numb, pallid hand,
These limbs are scraps of life and spiritless,
Remaining substance, wasted, comeliness.
The Soul lives on in deathless angels care
Who waft it up a winding golden Stair,

And bear it onward through the mystic Gate,
Beyond the slumbrous Halls to God's Estate.
Thus life is fled to blind Infinity:
Now dust to dust, and immortality

John R. Keast

Post War

- on one occasion while still in uniform John stopped to visit his sister Pat in Toronto who was working as a legal secretary in the Law Firm of Fennell, Porter, McLean and Davis. All the secretaries fell in love with this dashing young man.
- John returned to Fergus where he worked for 1 month in the Beatty factory
- John felt the call of people contact and the art of selling so he trained and became a life insurance agent for Prudential Life and he later moved onto Canada Life

Marriage - Jean Milligan - 1946

July 06, 1946 at the tender age of 23 years John married Jean Milligan - the girl from Fergus - daughter of the former Mayor in the Anglican Church in Elora

- it was also at this age of 23 that John really became interested in art
- had 2 children - Roderick Keast born December 26, 1947
 - Cathy Keast born January 07, 1950

- I understand that one of the Christmas Gifts John received from his wife during their first year of marriage was a paint by number set. We all have to start somewhere.

Galt:

Eventually John wanted to get into business for himself - something different than life insurance - something special - something he didn't know too much about at the time so John opened his own business in Galt.

"Frames of Distinction by John Robert Keast" became established in an old brick house with leaded windows and beautiful woodwork. There John would establish an old gallery, and he would sell art supplies and frame pictures and paintings. John and his wife would do custom matting, framing and tinting. They would sell antiques on consignment.

For the next 3 summers John would attend Dune School of Fine Arts where he would work with such famous painters as Frederick Varley of the Group of 7

1955 - Being in private business was a learning experience. One of the lessons to be learned was how to charge out their time. On more than one occasion John would be putting out top quality work for less than cost. Finally John had to close his doors and before he did he visited all of his creditors to tell them what he was doing and that he would be making payments to pay off his indebtedness to them. True to his word, he did.

Magic Pantry 1955

In 1955 John found himself back into sales and he sold freezers for Magic Pantry in the Kitchener and Galt area and did rather well. John moved his family onto a farm in the area. John developed a freezer plan and a food plan for his customers which became very popular.

- John sold to a young newly married couple who were living in the upstairs apartment of the old Beatty house in Fergus their very first freezer - Fred and Toren Beatty.

Sear's Salesman 1956

1956 Sears was beginning to move into Canada from the USA under the name of Simpson-Sears and they approached John about selling their freezers

- John's freezer plan and food plan became extremely successful to the point that John was sent to lecture to other Sears employees in Chicago

1957 at the age of 34 years a colleague from Magic Pantry, Wilson Nuttall, persuaded John to move his family to Sudbury to sell freezers and food plan in Northern Ontario. Wilson Nuttall had established his own business known as Northern Provisioners

Something Missing:

John's skill as a salesman and his love of people placed him on the road to financial success..... but he was not happy.....something was missing in his life.

The Search: 1958

In 1958 at the age of 35 years John quit Northern Provisioners and was immediately employed by Fuller Brush Co.

- moved from Sudbury and built a house in Elliott Lake

Elliot Lake:

- became very successful with Fuller
- was promoted and made responsible for a larger area of Northern Ontario
- active in the community
 - helped develop the Elliot Lake ski hill and became the President of the Ski Club
 - John worked at clearing trails for the skiers
 - became a member of the Chamber of Commerce
 - became one of the youngest wardens in the Anglican Church
- developed a rock garden with little waterfalls going into a water pond in his back yard. John had converted an abandoned bath tub into a work of art for his water pond.

- won first prize in Elliot Lake for his gardening
- the local children would come and watch John work on his garden and periodically he would drop a rock near his hand and would dramatically hold up his hand to the children claiming the rock knocked his finger off. The children would frantically run and tell their parents about the bad accident and the parents would assure the children that John was tricking them with his missing finger.
- John continued to love being with people and children but something was still missing. John began reading the Power of Positive Thinking by Norman Vincent Peale

Sudbury: 1961

- In 1961 at the age of 38 years John was promoted again by Fuller Brush which required him to move back to Sudbury
- this time John became the top salesman in all of Northern Ontario from the Ontario/Manitoba border to the Ontario/ Quebec border
 - then John's territory was expanded into Northern Quebec and Central to Southern Ontario down to Steeles Avenue.
 - John lived in a suit and tie and lived on the road. The harder he worked the more financially successful he became. The harder he worked, the greater the stress to do even better. Success meant dollars, lots of dollars. The one enjoyment he had - was dealing with people - John loved people.

1967 - Rock Lake

- bought country property near Burwash - Rock Lake - intuitively John was searching for something
- John bought the property from an old Finlander - had no electricity but it had a sauna - very basic

And at the same time

- extremely successful financially
- 2 children were touring Europe
- 1967 - young Roderick who was an Ontario Scholar went to Europe
- Kathy took her Grade 13 in Switzerland

The Turning Point:

- from 1946 until 1970 John was a hard working family man. He loved his children
- there would be lively discussions at the dinner table
- the family would go on a major camping trip across Canada in their volkswagen almost every year
- was a very successful salesman - developed a reputation of being honest with his customers and honest about his products
- underneath this appearance of complete success and apparent happiness there was brewing the lava of unhappiness - discontent - a strong awareness that all was not well - that there is more to life than material trimmings and then it erupted.

October 20, 1970: - Quitting Fuller

- As I mentioned before, John spent almost all of his time in a suit and tie.
- Then on October 20, 1970 John told his superior he was quitting Fuller Brush Co. The superior was flabbergasted as John was one of their most successful if not their **most** successful salesman and he was quitting to become unemployed or at best the lowly salesman on the beat.

1971 - Quitting Marriage:

- John drifted about on the rough seas of life without a rudder or compass to steer by. John's life had bottomed out and he was floundering.
- One summers day in 1971 at Rock Lake near Burwash, Jean Milligan Keast killed one of John's almost tamed squirrels with a chunk of wood - John, totally out of character, snapped and told his wife their marriage was over.

- John gave his wife everything they owned except his car and the country property near Burwash.

Changing Course:

Life can be an exciting adventure and I try to compare it to a tree. Our life starts at the base of the tree and throughout life as we travel up the tree we make decisions that determine our future. A decision here and a decision there will take us up various branches and we live with the consequences of our actions.

Here we can see John's life going up a particular branch of the tree. John,..... the basic man,...loved being with people, enjoyed gardening, and participating in lively discussions. John,...a kind, gentle and generous man was also very successful financially speaking but at the same time felt he was a prisoner.

There are times in our life when we must come to a complete stop and reassess what we are doing. Some of us come to a stop by our own doing,..... others come to a stop by other people's doing..... but regardless of who does what there comes a time of reflection..... of reassessment. What do we really want out of our short life here on earth? Are we really happy with our life at the present time?

John at this point is about to change course completely. There is a rebuilding about to take place which is for the most part out of John's control. Unknown to him at this time this major change of course will personally benefit him in innumerable ways and in so doing benefits us in Rydal Bank, Bruce Mines and the Algoma District.

The Quest Continues:

1972 - The Round Barn & Marjorie Butterfield

- John wanted the simple life free from the rat race, the suit and tie
- Around 1972 John sold the Cabin near Burwash and moved to Thessalon where he bought the Round Barn
- for 7 years John teamed up with Marjorie Butterfield and they operated the Round Barn. Whenever they needed money John would go out and sell for Fuller Brush.
- This is a time where John embarks on one of his experiences as a teacher of youth.

Teacher of Youth:

- John is known to be a periodic stretcher of truthand one who takes advantage of the young and trusting..... - for example he invited 12 year old Evan Kelly to spend a week at the Round Barn to enjoy the leisurely past-time of haying. (That sentence is just so full of contradictions)
- John is not particularly known for his mechanical ability
- bought a used tractor and a used haymower (sicklemower) which didn't work - it didn't work because the blade did not fit as it was the wrong gauge.

- most summers Evan would spend 4 - 5 weeks helping John work the 1 acre vegetable garden and care for the chickens, ducks and cows.
- they sold produce from the garden and made deliveries to the Town of Thessalon and to Melwell Lodge.
- John would generously reward Evan with the words of a job well done and gave him a cheque for \$150.00

What John gave Evan was worth more than money.

- John was a great teacher - taught Evan, basically a city kid about life, death and sex
- Evan learned when the cows were going into heat and to call in the breeder
- Evan learned about death when the chickens, ducks and cows had to be slaughtered.
- taught under-aged Evan how to drive a car on the local back-roads
- taught Evan how to barter like trading a couple of cans of carpet cleaner for an old wood stove which John still has.

John also revealed his skills as a philosopher/teacher

Philosopher/Teacher

- taught Evan then (and the rest of us now) that there is more to life than money
 - John practiced what he taught
 - John went from a top executive down (or up - depending on your perspective) to a door-to-door salesman
 - success can be measured in many ways and not necessarily in terms of money
 - John goes out of his way to be kind and generous to those around him
 - John always sees the good side of everything, everywhere he goes
 - Adventurer - lover of life - John likes to canoe the fast running rivers while he is young and fit and leave the lakes for when he is older more in his 80ies.
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- soon the Round Barn grew in popularity and success and it started to become another rat race
 - John knew he was on the right road but something was still missing - something very important.
 - John told Marjorie he wanted out - the Round Barn was now worth substantially more than what they paid for it and John sold his half interest to Marjorie for less than his fair share.

The Quest Continues: Rydal Bank:

September 1978 - John had to find a house to sleep in and so he visited Bill Minion, a local realtor and gentleman in Thessalon who advised John that Johnny Orr from Rydal Bank was just in that morning to list his house for sale. John bought it that day for \$14,000.00

- John had returned to the village where his great uncle a/k/a John Keast used to live as a harness maker and who is now buried in the Little Rapids cemetery. Did you know that the surname "Keast" is an old Cornish name. Dare we say "Welcome Home, John !?"

I believe many of us have had the pleasure of visiting John in his house, with its wood burning kitchen stove, the big pine timber floor boards, the stain glass windows located on the side of a hill near Ottertail Lake and the Thessalon River.

Now remember these words:

When I have a house....as I sometime may
I'll suit my fancy in every way,
I'll fill it with things that have caught my eye
In drifting from Iceland to Molokai

or these words

My house will stand on the side of a hill
By a slow, broad river, deep and still,
With a tall lone pine on guard near by
Where the birds can sing and the stormwinds cry.

Or these words

For I'll have good friends who can sit and chat
Or simply sit, when it comes to that,
By the fireplace where the fir logs blaze
And the smoke rolls up in a weaving haze.

- John Robert Keast had found his "Vagabond House"

John Robert Keast is getting close but he's not home free yet. John's life was being guided.

Meeting Jean Hershey: 1978 at the age of 55 years

October 27, 1978 -at the age of 55 - John was invited to a Hallowe'en house party on Barr Road at the residence of Bob and Peggy Cooper. It was to be a teacher's staff party and those in attendance were to dress up in their favourite character's costume.

- Jean Hershey was also invited to that party believing there would be many colleagues in attendance. Jean's costume was complete in every detail from her knee-high boots to the tiara crowning her head. When Jean arrived she discovered to her horror that she was the one of 8 or so in attendance in full costume and where were the other costumed guests. For most of the evening this modest lady kept her long coat on. Those in attendance thought Jean was dressed as a Royal Princess. Eventually it became so warm that she was obliged to remove her coat to reveal her complete costume and true identitythat of..... "Wonder Woman".....how appropriate!

- John was his usual entertaining good self and he visited with Jean throughout the evening. John was full of enthusiasm, amusing, entertaining and a good listener. Not to miss an opportunity John asked Jean for her address and telephone number which was readily given with the explicit response..... "Do Call"

John....it is fortunate for both this community and yourself that you did what the lady asked..

Happiness Is Found - Life Has New Meaning - Everything is Fresh Again

John's quest for happiness is now complete.
John has found his soul-mate ! His Wonder Woman !
John has found his "Vagabond House" !
John has found happiness and he wants to share it !
And Share It He Does !!!

From 1978 to the present time John has shared his remarkable talents and energy far and wide with benefits directly affecting this community. John and Jean are volunteers ready to answer any call.

Marriage - Jean Hershey

- November 07, 1981 Rev. Jim Gill attended at the Keast residence in Rydal Bank and blessed the marriage of John and Jean before 23 guests. Natalie Zaheric was expanding her experiences and skills by preparing a sit down meal for the 23 guests in the restricted area of the Keast kitchen and at the same time using the wood stove for her cooking. In between the vows and the signing of the register John was putting wood on the fire to keep Natalie going.

Community Involvement:

While John has always been involved in the community where he has lived, since 1978 his involvement in this community has intensified and expanded. One can love his neighbours, love life, love community activities particularly if he, himself, is loved.

Community Activities:

The following is a list of some but not all of John's activities in the community.

- member of the Royal Canadian Legion Local Branch 211
 - specializes in youth education, public speaking, essays, poetry, poster competitions
- member of the Bruce Mines & District Chamber of Commerce
 - special volunteer for the french fry committee
- volunteer as one of the keeper of the gates at the annual Bruce Mines Fall Fair
- former volunteer at the Arena Canteen during youth skating
- a member of the Arts Committee at the Bruce Mines & Plummer Additional Library
- Vice-President of the Bruce Mines Ski Club
- bush whacker and general developer of the Bruce Mines and Rydal Bank ski trails
- general maintenance man of the Voyageur Trails
- 5 year volunteer with Victims in Crisis organization in S.S.M.
- volunteer supporter of the Canada Day Celebrations in Bruce Mines by donating a work of art created by him during the actual celebrations and then auctioned off to support the local community.

- one of the founding members of the well known art show and sale "Four & Friends"
- one of the founding members of the Rydal Bank Historical Society
- he is the Welcome Wagon to new residents in Rydal Bank
- volunteer canvasser for the Cancer Society and the Heart & Stroke Foundation
- a member of the Rydal Bank Park and Dam Committee
- a member of the LACAC Committee to save the Colonel Smythe House
- a Director on the Board of Directors of the Art Gallery of Algoma in S.S.M.
- Acquisition Chairman for the Art Gallery of Algoma
- a Director on the Board of Directors of the Sault Ste. Marie Arts Council
- for the past 24 years has been teaching Continuing Education in Landscape Painting at Central Algoma Secondary School and Soo College.
- generously donates his paintings to groups such as the Beth Jacob Synagogue in S.S.M. for their fund raisers.
- donates his paintings for fundraisers for M.S. Society, Heart & Stroke, Minor Hockey just to name a few.
- a volunteer in the Holy Walk as head beggar with his group of young ruffians.
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- an individual supporter of those who need assistance, reassurance, confidence, encouragement.
- an anonymous giver and supporter to those known only by him and the recipient
- a supporter of youth

Lakeway:

One time when Jean was teaching at Lakeway Collegiate in the Soo and John's family were visiting from British Columbia, John agreed to recite for Jean's grade 10 English class. John's family arrived at the school and John, dressed in a toga stood on the stage and recited great sections of Caesar's and Anthony's speeches. The students also did recitations but they weren't as cute in their togas. It was a memorable experience for all "Yon Cassius has a lean and hungry look."

A Story Teller:

Many have experienced the joy and pleasure of a good meal in the Keast house and listen to John tell stories, enthraling his company who hang onto his every word, only to be left hanging in the air with the realization that it was only a story and not a factual recollection of events.

Vagabond House:

John can recite many lines of this Don Blanding poem: Vagabond House. John had recited this poem to Jean a few times and she loved it and what it portrays. Once in their early years together when John and Jean were touring Maine they were driving in the country and John suddenly put on the brakes and backed up the car saying, "Did you see it? Vagabond's House! They know it! They know the poem!" So nothing would have it but he tore up to the front door of this house and recited the opening lines of the poem - much to the dismay of the residents.

John loves life - his passion, enthusiasm and impetuous nature. John lives life to the full. John loves people and his mind is always working and he doesn't let "What if I wait upon a dare."

A Spiritual Person:

John is a spiritual person and is spiritually sensitive as he works closely with nature putting the beauty of the Creator onto canvass and as he interacts with his fellow man. John is very involved in the Anglican church and when in Toronto loves to go to St. James Anglican Church just to witness the ritual. When in British Columbia, John will visit the Unitarian Church for the same reasons. John is widely read and loves to talk about religion. John gets a joy out of taking a position which would appear out of character for him and will discuss that point of view with his companion, listening and accepting their views yet challenging them.

John has experienced that old adage of "what goes around, comes around"

Conclusion:

John Robert Keast supported by his Jeannie, his Wonder Woman, has helped his neighbours and his community through the sharing of himself. It is this sharing, which we have noted earlier, that John has brought recognition to Rydal Bank, Bruce Mines and the surrounding area. All of us are much richer because of John's generosity and he setting an example by the way he lives. That success is much more valuable and important than money and accumulation of material assets.

Ladies and Gentlemen I am very pleased to present our very own artist, philosopher, teacher, adventurer, philanthropist - John Keast. !

Respectfully Submitted by:

Larry D. Peterson