

A Legend Leaves: Longtime ITD Communications Chief Jeff Stratten Retires



Reed Hollinshead
PUBLIC INFO OFFICER

Jeff Stratten came to ITD from Pocatello as a fair-haired lad of 27 in mid-August 1985. He was hired as the third Communications Chief for the department, following Del Kraus and Bill Harvey. For the next three decades, he shaped ITD's messages and wrote the narrative, until he stepped away for a time after a brush with Acute Myeloid Leukemia just before Thanksgiving in 2013.

He returned a few years later as a temporary employee to serve in a communications capacity with the DMV.

After roaming these halls for more than 36 years, Jeff will leave ITD for the final time on Friday, Jan. 28.

Along the way, Jeff worked for six directors (Dean Tisdale, Kermit Kiebert, Dwight Bower, Dave Ekern, Pam Lowe, Brian Ness), and five acting directors (George Neumayer, Keith Green, Jim Ross, Scott Stokes, Dwight Bower), plus two DMV Administrators (Alan Frew and Alberto Gonzalez).

"All had the same choice at the end of each work day...do the paperwork to fire me, or go home and eat dinner. Thankfully their stomachs always won out," Stratten said.

Stratten helped shape and mentor many communications professionals locally, from those who passed through the department on their way to careers elsewhere, to those from other organizations who regularly sought out his advice and guidance.



Jeff and President Bill Clinton worked together in the mid-90s when Clinton was touring flooding in Idaho.



He also was always good for a well-timed laugh. Dave Tuttle, ITD's longtime videographer, who worked with Jeff almost his entire career, agrees.

"The one thing about Jeff is his sense of humor. Magnificently dry, steeped in wit and perfect timing."

Jeff had a big impact on communication efforts within the transportation scene nationally as well. He was twice the vice chair of AASHTO's (American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials) Subcommittee on Public Affairs, and won their Founder's Award in 2009 in recognition of professional service and leadership.

He accepted the national *Take Pride in America* Award on the White House south lawn from President Ronald Reagan in July 1988. He also worked with Bill Clinton when the President came to tour flooding damage in North Idaho in 1995.

Befitting his service-oriented legacy, Jeff was due to retire December 31, but stayed on an extra month to help the DMV because there was a need.

"Every day, I believed in the mission of the department, the value of its services and the people who provided them," Stratten said.

"I am incredibly lucky to have spent the majority of my working life here. I am proud of the department and the small role I played in its success."

Note: Jeff holds a special place for me, since he hired me twice (first in 1990 as an intern just about to graduate from Boise State University, then again in 2008 when I returned to the Treasure Valley. You could say I owe him my professional career!). He was my manager for the first 15 of my 22 years with ITD. When I left the department in 1998, it was for a job he

Jeff with Gov. Butch Otter before the US-2, Dover Bridge dedication in D1 in 2009.



Jeff in his return to ITD in 2017 with the DMV. Thanks to his leukemia treatment and chemotherapy, his straight blond hair was replaced with a brown, curly mop.

Here are a few comments from his peers nationally that show his impact:

From: Tracey Bramble, Iowa DOT

I have attended three TransComm (formerly NTPAW) annual meetings with Jeff over the years. In a world of political correctness, I've found Jeff to be a breath of fresh air. In the past, we have all been caught up in couching messages in a way that won't offend or upset people. Jeff was never one for sugar-coating the issues. I have very much appreciated his straightforward approach to communicating difficult concept and issues. In today's social media climate, Jeff's "hit the issue head on" approach works very well. We're finding that the less we try to "craft" a message and instead just tell people the straight scoop, the more we can create a dialog with our customers that benefits everyone.

On a personal note, Jeff is funny and kind, and one heck of a whitewater rafter!

may have had a hand in me getting – it was at Idaho State University, and he was Alumni President. So having him as a reference and former boss certainly did not hurt my chances!

I still remember that late-November day back in 2013 when he was diagnosed. He left a note for us office workers saying he needed to report to the hospital to start treatments for leukemia. In typical Jeff fashion, he tried to downplay it, but we weren't buying it. None of us knew just how serious it was. Thank goodness he gets to walk out the door on his own terms.

When Jeff received a standing ovation from the Idaho Transportation Board and the people in attendance at the board's meeting in the HQ Auditorium when he returned to ITD in 2017 after his battle with leukemia, it said so much about his impact on the department, both personally and professionally.

But it goes beyond work for me - he's a great guy and an even better friend!



Jeff in his Transporter debut, in September 1985.



From: Terri Angier, Oklahoma DOT

I first met Jeff at NTPAW 1990 in Iowa. It soon became very apparent that he, along with a few others at the time, were the "go-to people" for our group. Jeff made time for everyone and always encouraged us all to make a point of not only meeting the new people but calling them and keeping in touch with them, which is something I am in the habit of to this day.

Everyone has already outlined his many great qualities. I place his sense of humor and his care for others on top of the list. Jeff is one of very few still remaining in TransComm who was there when I came to the group 26 years ago. He has given a lot of himself to our group and worked in almost every capacity within our structure.

From: Valerie Burnette Edgar, Maryland DOT

I've taken a little bit of time to write so I could make sure I don't ruin my career by revealing any escapades with Jeff and Mary Jo (Ole, Nebraska DOT). My first NTPAW was in Idaho - so Jeff was our host. I was 22 years old and pretty naïve. Jeff watched out for me, and made sure I didn't end up missing my plane (yes, one gal did...). We went whitewater rafting and then to a cookout with dancing - it is still a very happy memory. Jeff even sang us some songs on the bus.

Jeff's sense of humor is unique - but I definitely got it. At one meeting, Mary Jo and Jeff and I were having lunch and Jeff outlined his plan for a book on dating -- essentially saying he preferred his dog, with specific examples. I laughed so hard I cried.

For all the joking, he always made time to help colleagues with work advise, sharing files of artwork and campaigns, better ways to do things with less. He has a kind heart and if you are lucky enough to be his friend, he'll do anything for you. I think if I called him up



Jeff, center, with the Public Affairs staff in 1992. From L to R: Shannon Porter, Barbara Babic, Arvetta Cheek, Valencia Bilyeu, Jeff, Julie Stutts, Yours Truly, Jeanine Bohannon.

today and said, "hey, I'm in Idaho and need a place to stay, can I come over?" He'd say "sure." I might have to share the bed with the dog, but he'd take me in.

He's the kind of guy that no matter how much time has passed since you last talked, you'd comfortably pick up right where you left off.

From: Dana Alexander Nolf,
Formerly of Rhode Island DOT

To me, Jeff is a dichotomy -- quiet and serious as well as boisterous and funny. He could tell you about every single communications conference that ever took place, where they were and who attended. His knowledge was encyclopedic and his skills were sharp. And then he'd tell you a joke, or don a funny costume (nothing was too outrageous) -- George Washington (a photo of him and another colleague dressed as Martha hung in my office for years) or one of the South Park characters and turn these educational information- sharing sessions into unforgettable experiences.

Being a part of TransComm/NTPAW was a highlight of my career in transportation and Jeff definitely helped make those annual experiences memorable.

From: Stacey Stegman,
Formerly of Colorado DOT

When I started coming to NTPAW in the 1990s, it was clear that Jeff was a pioneer and a well-respected member and unofficial leader of the group. Jeff's dry and unconventional sense of humor is what made me want to be his friend. He doesn't worry about political correctness and instead lives his life being authentic and accepting, while not taking life so seriously. I took over the awards program from Jeff, but still enlisted his help, as he could always be counted on to add that something special.

I have fond memories of Jeff dressed as an Alaskan mountain man, George Washington, Shirley (of Laverne and Shirley)...or maybe it was Laverne...and others. But more than that, Jeff is a solid communicator who always stepped up to do what needed to be done, offered advice or shared his experience and helped make NTPAW (now TransComm) one of the best professional groups for communication professionals in the industry.

From: Mary Jo Ole, Nebraska DOT

Jeff and I go back 30 years. We attended our first NTPAW together in Tan-Tar-A MO, back when we were newbies. Although we have changed, the issues--not so much; the theme of that 1986 Conference was "The Communication Challenge."

Jeff became one of my best friends. He is smart and he could make me laugh without saying much. He came to spend time with me when I went to help Utah DOT set up the JIC for the Winter Olympics. It was snowy and freezing and we slept outside, in sleeping bags, on his friend's deck.

He is the real outdoorsman, but I loved it, and I think he was surprised that I would/could do that. Jeff would, could and did everything for our professional group. He's been there, done that, coordinated this and wrote about that. He always said he'd write a book, and he has so many books that he COULD write. His sense of humor was/may still be on another level. He is, without a doubt, my favorite humorist since Bob Newhart. Mostly, though, Jeff is just my favorite. Period!