

## **The liberation of Joe Elam**

By Mirchaye Sahl

Washington D.C – “Adventurous” is something everyone wishes to be, yet scared to pursue. Every time, we dare to be become adventurous, fear holds us back, it in prison’s us. Joe Elam was one of those people who feared adventure, till one day he opened his eyes and heart to it. His release from fear not only allowed him to explore adventure in his country, but also beyond its borders.

Hailing from Kerla, a small state in the south-west region of India, Joseph Verghese Elamanamadathil was born to an Orthodox-Catholic family on December 1st, 1939. He was brought up in a big family of 11 children; where he takes the 10th of 11.

Though his 16 letters Indian last name “Elamanamadathil” has a special meaning in his language, meaning “The young man dwelling in a forty five castle,” he was later forced to change it as he was having a hard time getting by, especially after he moved to the United States. Most people had a hard time pronouncing it, he was forced to spell and pronounce his name to his professors when he was studying in college. He chose “Elam” because it was quite a famous name in America at the time, and also was the name of an ancient civilization centered in the far west and southwest of modern-day Iran. On top of this, “Elam” is also a transcription from Biblical Hebrew.

Joe Elam had an interesting life, where he’s gotten the opportunity to explore many adventures. He most certainly enjoyed life, nature, and canoeing as he was younger. He especially fancied canoeing because he lived close to the water front in his town, in fact, Jacky Kennedy used to frequent this town especially for the beautiful beaches it possessed, he explained.

Though he tried to enjoy life as best as he could, he only got inspired to become completely fearless and adventurous after he had the opportunity to meet the acquaintance of two German men. When he was a senior at Madras University in India, two visitors came from Germany; one was a journalist by the name of Andreas Naumann and the other was Rolfe Lutz. These two visitors wanted to see the Vasco Dynamo’s grave in India and Elam took them to show them around. These people fascinated him; they had walked all the way from Germany for four and a half years, after travelling across Africa and the Middle East to finally get to India.

Elam had his siblings already residing here in America, but the idea of him moving for good had never enticed him enough until these two visitors from Germany triggered his lust to travel the world. When he saw the experiences they had explored while traveling and their guts to travel by foot for this long, an idea to be a traveler himself shone to him. In 1959, he dropped out of law school, sold all of his books and started to travel the world. He found law to be “boring and unnecessarily complicated.” Instead, he developed a strong passion for Journalism. In 1964, he landed in Illinois, United States. He was admitted at North Western University at the Medill

School of Journalism in Evanston, Illinois. His travel experience in India had made him an adept traveler; therefore, he didn't feel lost in a new and huge country like America. Once he was acquainted with America and its culture, he went to pursue his goal, which was seeking for his liberation.

He frequented Rush Street, a predominantly northbound one-way street in the near North side community area of Chicago. It fascinated him a lot and it was there he got to experience most of what life had to offer. This street was known as the street of sin. He went and studied different strip clubs, where he enjoyed himself as well. His philosophy is "to enjoy everything in life and only stop enjoying it if it hurts others." Once in Illinois, he was no longer shackled by religion restrictions or his father; Elam went after whatever made him happy and feel good.

Elam has role models he looks up to and gets inspiration from, such as French Philosopher Rousseau, who inspired him tremendously. He mentioned one of the things Rousseau said: "Man is free everywhere, but always in shackles and its how you break the shackles that matters", and Shakespeare "Life is a tale told by an idiot." These two and many other prominent people have inspired and encouraged him to let go of his fear and interact with the world.

He has developed appreciation and tolerance for human life, therefore has the ability to live with people from different ethnic, racial and cultural backgrounds. He advises everyone to travel, learn about other countries, races and cultures. Living with different people, he believes, will allow us to be more flexible in life. And most of all, it will teach us how to appreciate and love. He says; "He who loves lives best. I love everything, I love my students and America for the freedom it has given me to express my inner self."

Answering to my question what his advice would be to aspiring journalists; Elam suggests we ask ourselves the question: "Am I educated?"

He explains; "Education is not only about school, but also about experiences in life. You can only say you're fully educated once you've seen all of what the world has to offer and you let go of your fear. Fearlessness is the heart of education."

He adds; "How to break the shackles of fear? Mingle with people from other cultures, travel!"

His major accomplishment in life, he says is; "coming to this country and having my voice heard and breaking through as a free man." According to his Sagittarian horoscope, he shares, his profession is ought to be Journalism and Teaching. He is a happy and nice man, but if someone tries to step on his toes, he says, "I'll cut their heads off, I have no remorse for those who want to hurt me."

Elam is currently working as an Associate Professor of Journalism at the University of the District of Columbia, where plans to retire from in May of 2014.

Adventurous, fearless, exuberant and bright as he is, Joe Elam has shone his light beyond himself and onto others. He is, indeed, an interesting and aspiring person to look up to and learn a great deal from.