

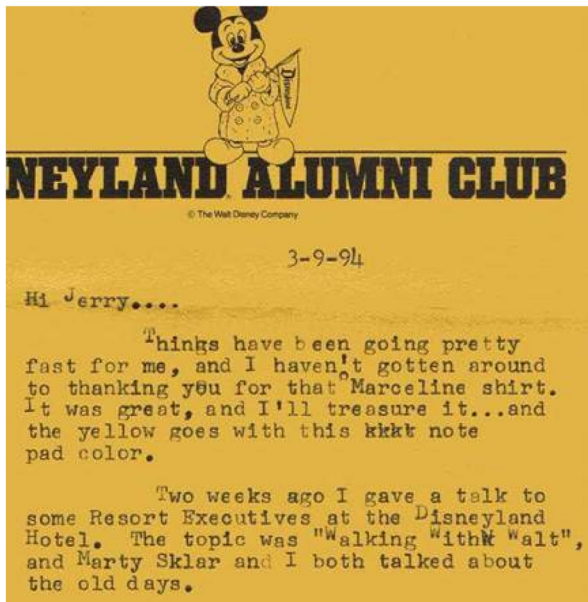


## How Disney Legend Van France Changed a Life – Disneylander Jerry's story

October 3rd marks the birthday of Disney Legend Van France. Van was an icon – a genius in sharing Walt's vision of training and hiring "The Disney Way." We hope you'll enjoy this touching tribute to Van and the lives he continues to touch. -Pam Lipp

There are countless impactful quotes by Walt Disney and Van France, but one of Van's phrases that sticks out in conjunction with today's story is this:

*"What happens 'backstage' will end up 'onstage'. If we aren't friendly with each other ... smiling and saying 'good morning' and things like that, then we'll have a similar attitude toward our guests."*



### THE STORY BEHIND THE FAMOUS STATIONARY IMAGE

These words, written by Van Arsdale France, Professor Emeritus and Founder of the Disney University, are the epitome of blending true character into the workplace setting, a closely held Disney value. Van was a pioneer in thinking differently about the way we behave at work and interacting in our jobs ... and he knew how to practice "backstage" what he preached "onstage".

We met Disneylander Jerry at a recent book-signing event. Jerry anxiously arrived at the Citrus Heights Barnes & Noble an hour prior to when signing was scheduled to begin. He had to be the first in line; there wasn't any other option. Resting on his lap was his new book, Disney U: [http://www.amazon.com/dp/0071808078/ref=as\\_li\\_ss\\_til?tag=micechat-20&camp=0&creative=0&linkCode=as4&creativeASIN=0071808078&adid=0DBWS3ATA4MEJ0YBCXNY](http://www.amazon.com/dp/0071808078/ref=as_li_ss_til?tag=micechat-20&camp=0&creative=0&linkCode=as4&creativeASIN=0071808078&adid=0DBWS3ATA4MEJ0YBCXNY)



Once we got over the surprise that there was a line at all, we couldn't help but notice Jerry waiting, in his wheelchair, and watching the clock. He seemed anxious and eager but politely waited. When his turn came, he quickly tried to share his story - about Van France, a relatively unknown but deserving rock star in the field of people management. When Jerry got to the front of the line, he shared with us his compelling connection to Van. With tears streaming down his face and voice cracking with emotion, Jerry said, "Van is my hero, my role-model, my cheerleader and inspiration. He is my mentor and responsible for my success." The story Jerry proceeded to tell us further deepened our profound respect for Van, a hero to many who worked for Disneyland, had reached "beyond the herm" and touched the life of a young man in desperate need of support. If we had any hope the Disney U would bring back to life the story of a man whose legacy deserved to be shared within and beyond the Disney community, the story that Jerry would soon tell us added another layer of meaning and resounding relevance.

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It was always easier to write for Walt Disney, because he knew exactly what he wanted people to do and how to act. So, he's always approve my hand books without much discussion.

Jerry told us about the letters – a scrapbook full of handwritten letters that he would soon share with us ... letters from Van written between 1992 and 1998, Van's last decade. Where digital communication today can seem fleeting, disposable, and at times sterile or tooperfect given the conveniences of autocorrect and spell check, the letters Van and Jerry exchanged were charged with heart and soul—replete with doodling, stickers, and Van's alltoofrequent typos.

Van's letters changed Jerry's life, and Jerry's changed Van's.

I'm very interested in your new dareer and your new apartment. As you wend your way through the procedures of Sacramento State and the Rehab department, I'm wondering if there is some way I can help.

I hope by now that you know that in addition to being a pen pal, I'm also a great admirer of yours. You're just about the finest young man I know.

Usually, at these times some kind of a letter of recommendation can help. And..although my title isn't very much, it sometimes can help.

## HELPING JERRY FIND A JOB

We all know about D23, MiceChat, and the many fan clubs of today. In 1991, Jerry attended the precursor to these widely popular events, the NFFC. Back in the days when inspiring soon-to-be anointed Disney legends gave back to the fans they would do it at The Mouse Club.. In addition to Frank Thomas, Ollie Johnston and Glen Keane, one of those genuine visionaries with bountiful energy was Van France. Jerry was ready to exit the event and wait another long year for his Disney fix (fan club meetings like this came but once a year), when he discovered there was one last presentation. Jerry wasn't too interested in the session subject about the Disney University, and he had never heard of the presenter Van France. But Jerry thought “Why not! I'm not ready to be done getting my Disney fill for the year, so I'll see what this guy Van has to say.”

Right now things are sort of busy, but I'd certainly be interested in your thoughts after you're visisits to Disneyland.

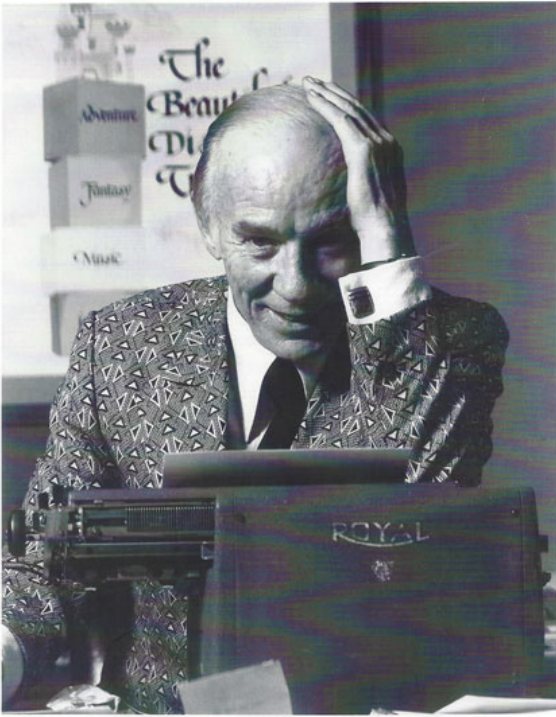
As a Disneyland fan, you probably have some positive thoughts about the experience. For example, if you were in your wheels, how was that handled?

You might have thoughts about a "Wheel Chair Guide to the Magic Kingdom", by Jerry Montgomerry.

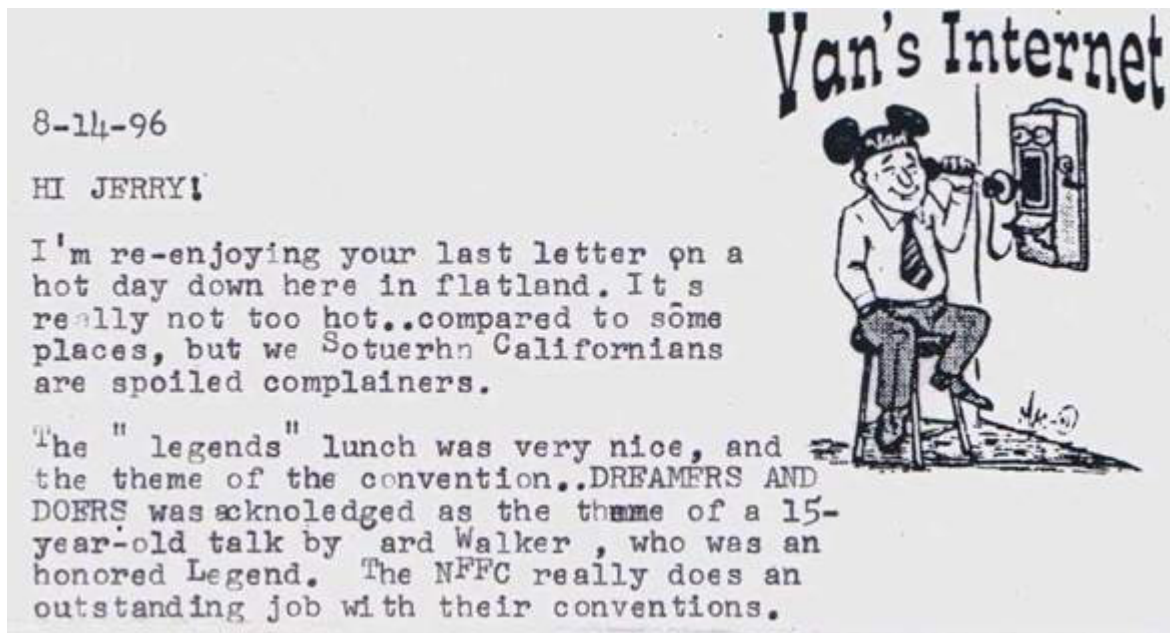
The lessons he heard that day from Van moved Jerry, who has cerebral palsy, in new and different ways. In Jerry's own words:

*“Most of my childhood was spent off to the side of my peers, and into early adulthood, most of my time was spent watching life slide past in the exploits and events of those around me. But where Disney was ... I belonged.”*





Once home, the newly inspired Jerry read Van's book ***Window on Main Street*** ([http://www.amazon.com/dp/0941613178/ref=as\\_li\\_ss\\_til?tag=micechat 20&camp=0&creative=0&linkCode=as4&creative ASIN=0941613178&adid=07C55Y0RQHSWV4CYT8DR](http://www.amazon.com/dp/0941613178/ref=as_li_ss_til?tag=micechat 20&camp=0&creative=0&linkCode=as4&creative ASIN=0941613178&adid=07C55Y0RQHSWV4CYT8DR)). Then, the normally introspective and shy Jerry took a leap of time beyond faith and wrote to Van about the possibility of becoming a cast member. For unknown reasons, Jerry's letter never made it to Van; Jerry, discouraged, assumed Van to be a celebrity Disney leader, one who didn't engage offstage as he had on stage at the fan club event. Jerry soon realized he couldn't have been more wrong about his assumptions that Van didn't have time for people like him.



The next year, Jerry would have another opportunity to meet the influential Van, who was volunteering and speaking at the 1992 Mouse Club event. Jerry attended Van's session and planned to approach him after his session. Jerry had to see if this guy Van was "all talk" or for real. How could Jerry have been so off about his first impression of Van? Jerry's instinct told him to not give up. It was Jerry's dream to work at Disneyland and maybe Van would like him – tell him how to go about navigating the employment process and share about jobs Jerry could perform with his disability.



12-16-93

HI JERRY...

Here's a note to my favorite Pen Pal who has more questions than I have answers. And I wanted to catch up just a bit in time for the New Year.

Nervous, intimidated, and definitely feeling inferior, Jerry approached Van. Jerry was surprised and relieved when Van remembered him from the year before and Jerry sheepishly told him about the letter he sent that received no reply; Van apologetically explained he never saw the letter pass his desk at Disneyland.

What ensued next would impact Jerry for the rest of his young adult life. Van told him not to send his letters to Disneyland, but to instead write Van at his home address. And so began eight years of a true pen pal relationship – but there was more: Van became Jerry's dedicated life coach. In his younger years, Jerry interpreted his cerebral palsy as a burden and something that should hold him back. Van was the first to encourage him otherwise. Van encouraged Jerry NOT to work at Disneyland but to instead get his college degree, to persevere and push through where stigma and seeming adversity had formerly created roadblocks. No one from Jerry's family had ever completed, let alone attended college. Largely due to Van's encouragement, Jerry would be the first to do so.

Jerry listened to Van and continued to write his newly found mentor. And Van wrote Jerry back.

After the book signing in Citrus Heights, Jerry welcomed Doug to his home to peruse the scrapbook of letters exchanged between him and his mentor, Van. Onebyone, Jerry shared the handwritten letters, typos and all, that influenced him to "stay the course" in his educational pursuits. The letters encouraged Jerry to not give up ... when his disability seemed to do otherwise. It may seem ironic that Van France, the founder of Disney University, ultimately dissuaded one of Disneyland's most loyal fans from working at the theme park; such a move is a testament to Van's quality of unambiguous honesty, a legacy further validated by the letters Jerry saved.

\* No, I'm not writing another book, but I had to do another chapter for Window On Main Street, to update it from 1990-1995..for the fourth printing,

I'm ~~gahpkaak~~ tempted, though. I really worry that the management is so concerned about profits that they have forgotten Walt's dream... and the magic, and the pixie dust.

\* I think Disney's future is secure, but I'm primarily concerned about Disneyland. IF, Jerry, I should write another book, what would you like to have it included. I'd appreciate your thoughts.

Jerry worked hard while studying public relations at Sacramento State University. Van cheered him along, providing strength and inspiration where Jerry's at times faltered. After eight years of work and study, Jerry would finally receive his hardearned diploma. The graduation ceremony was around the corner. Jerry had three tickets; two for his parents, and the third reserved for Van.



occasions. It is personal..neat..attractive ..and  
I like the " original isneylander".

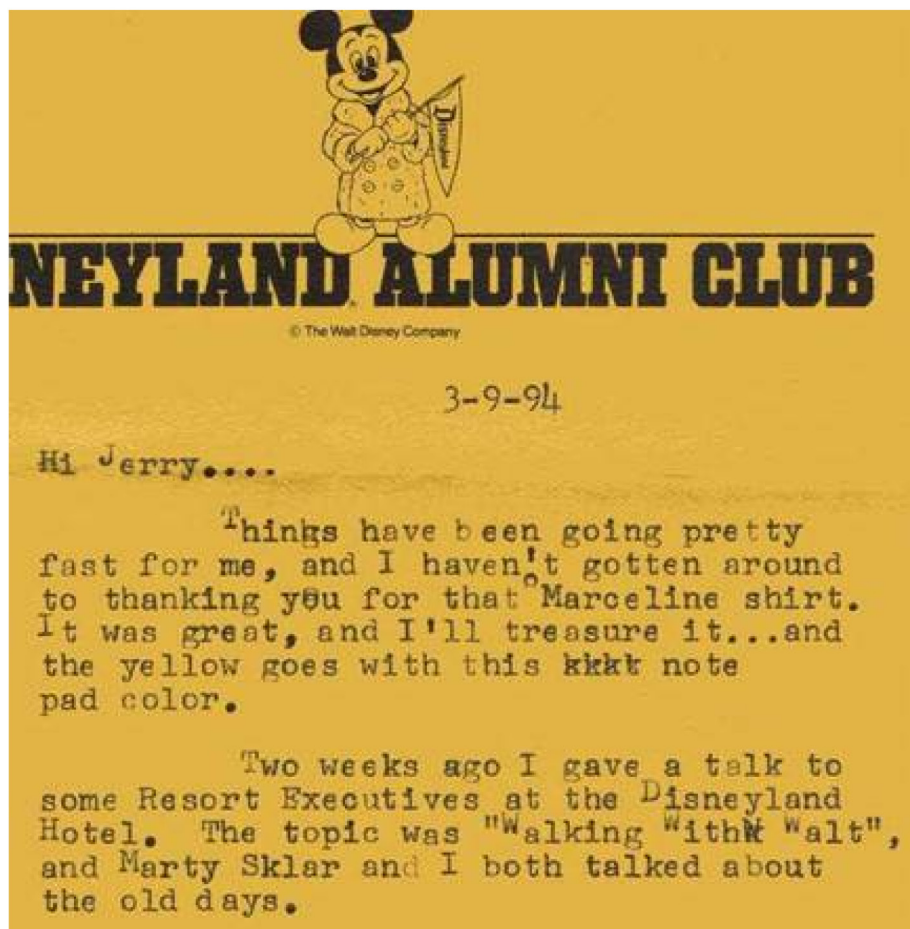
Jerry, that is creative and thoughtful and very sincerely  
appreciated.

*thanks* AND -

I LIKE YOUR  
**STYLE**

I'm glad you're going to CSUS. I'm a graduate of SDSU ..  
your fellow college. When I grauated, it was San Diego State  
Teachers College, there were about 1,000 students, including  
my class mate Art Linkletter, and Fraternity Brother Gregory  
( then his name was " Eldred" ) Peck. Art and I went the  
full four years. but Grez Peck went on to study at Berkley.

Communication between Jerry and Van also extended beyond written letters ; Van had given Jerry his phone number years before, and they talked often. Jerry called Van's home in October of 1999; he wanted to wish Van a happy birthday and share his graduation news. He immediately knew something was off when the line was disconnected. Via the forwarding phone number, Jerry reached family and learned Van was in the hospital; Van was very sick and his condition was terminal. Jerry was devastated – distraught, he hadn't thought to even consider life without Van.



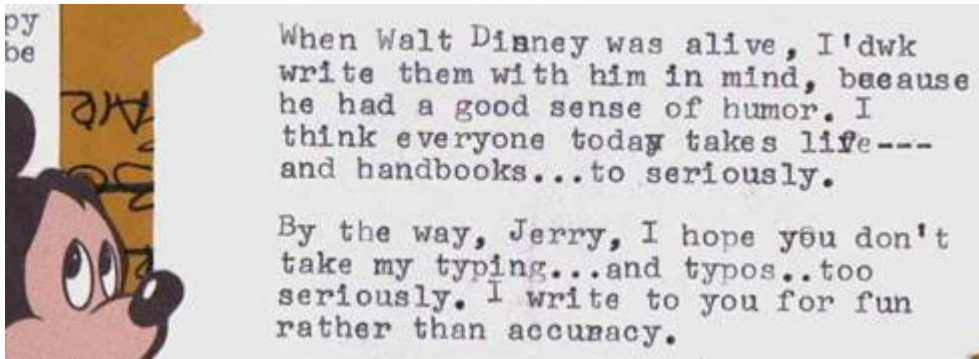


## A PRESENTATION AND MEETING WITH MARTY SKLAR

Too weak to hold the phone, Van's family member held the phone up to Van, allowing the two pen pals to have one last exchange of words:

Van: *"You have more experience with wheelchairs, but I am having trouble getting the hang of it."*

Jerry: *"You'll get it...I've just had more practice!"*



## ABOUT TYPOS AND WALT

For his graduation, Jerry's parents pulled together a ticket to Disneyland, his hardearned graduation gift. By now, Van had his Main Street Window. Honoring Van and all his support, Jerry, now an analyst for the California State Department of Transportation, honored Van. In the graduation invitation reserved for Van, Jerry wrote Van one last letter, sharing everything Van had meant to him. Jerry then purchased two Mickey Mouse balloons. He tied the graduation announcement to the invitation and directed his wheelchair to the sidewalk directly beneath Van's Main Street window. In a fitting sendoff to the mortal Van, Jerry released the balloons, sending Van his invitation and thanking him one last time for all his support. Jerry let go of the balloons – Jerry never let go of Van's lessons.



Jerry had always hoped that the reading world would one day learn the story of how Van exemplified what it meant to be a true Disney legend? Walt Disney's instinct in hiring Van, a brilliant developer of human potential, was trendsetting. Who could have foreseen that the philosophies created and cemented by the brilliant Van would continue to guide the Disney University philosophies still taught today? No one had to teach Van to "Walk the Park" like Walt Disney had done— Van embodied this – he personified this infamous philosophy that inspires true hands-on leaders. Van, more importantly, was and continues to be a true mentor ... just ask Jerry.

Pam and Doug operate a speaking and consulting business, DougLipp.com (<http://www.DougLipp.com>).

Doug Lipp is the author of Disney U ([http://www.amazon.com/dp/0071808078/ref=as\\_li\\_ss\\_til?tag=micechat 20&camp=0&creative=0&linkCode=as4&creativeASIN=0071808078&adid=0DBWS3ATA4MEJ0YBCXNY](http://www.amazon.com/dp/0071808078/ref=as_li_ss_til?tag=micechat 20&camp=0&creative=0&linkCode=as4&creativeASIN=0071808078&adid=0DBWS3ATA4MEJ0YBCXNY)) (McGraw Hill, March 2013), which highlights the founding philosophies of the Disney University and Van France's achievement in creating Walt Disney's vision for hiring and training. They can be reached at [pam@doughlipp.com](mailto:pam@doughlipp.com).



The authors of this article, Pam and Doug Lipp.

Jerry can be reached at [disneylander@yahoo.com](mailto:disneylander@yahoo.com) and is happy to respond to any direct questions about Van's inspiration.



## MICE CHAT :: 15 COMMENTS

Mandrini: Thank you so much for sharing. This is "real MAGIC" the magic where all the power emanates from, love at the highest possible level.

MinnieTheSmoocher: Salty Lucky Charms, too, Ju-osh\* That was beautiful, Pam & Doug. Thanks.

ScottOlsen: Anyone who thinks Walt Disney isn't alive will change their mind after reading this.

George Taylor: What a spectacular story. Thank you so much for sharing it.

KennyB: "That'll do, pig." Everybody above already said it.

Whitestrat: Really a wonderful and touching story. Thank You.

Wasn't sure where the story was going, but when I was crying at the end, I had a pretty good idea. Well done.

Bamato: What an amazing, inspirational, revitalizing, and powerful article. Thank you so much for sharing Jerry's story. We need more Van France in this world!

Dusty Sage: Pam and Doug, my sincerest thanks for your efforts in spreading the Van France story and for sharing Jerry's experience with us. This was a truly moving and wonderful treat. We hope to hear more about Van from you in the future.

Wanda Woman: A fantastic, uplifting story that was a joy to read. Thank you, Doug. Jerry, you're an inspiration and I wish you continued success in everything you do. Now I need to tend to my allergies.

Jeff Heimbuch: An absolutely heart warming and inspiring story. This was wonderful, Doug. Thank you for sharing.

Hank McCoy: Absolutely a great article! Thank you SO MUCH for sharing this beautiful story.

Jungle Trekkie: This article is terrific. Jerry is a very inspiring person. He is carrying on Van France's work of making the world a better place by inspiring others to do their best. You can't ask for a better legacy than that. Thanks to Jerry and Van for making the world a better place, and to Doug for telling their story.

Jungle Trekkie > Jungle Trekkie: I neglected to thank Pam also for telling this story. Thanks Pam.

Mjacka: Simply one of the best articles I've ever read - on this site, on any Disney site, maybe anywhere. Thanks.

Ju-osh: I won't lie -- I had NO IDEA where this article was going when I started reading it this morning. Now, some five or ten minutes later, I have to thank you and damn you for your work. I want to THANK YOU for such a touching and beautifully written story. Seriously, it represents a new style of writing for MiceChat, and one I'd LOVE to see more of! Now for the damning...DAMN YOU for making my Lucky Charms so salty! Salty, you ask? Yes, cuz YOU MADE ME CRY INTO MY CEREAL!