

‘Living Legend’ Reifer reflects on life’s journey

By GORDON RAGO Staff writer | Posted: Wednesday, April 10, 2013 12:05 pm



Little did Hans Reifer know that 75 years after fleeing from Nazi Germany as a six-year old child with his father, mother, and sister, he would return to his home city of Vienna for the first time to be honored by its mayor and chancellor of Austria.

Reifer’s journey has taken him across Europe and the United States where he created his own version of the American Dream and this Friday will take him back to the country he and his family were once forced to escape.

In addition to the trip to his home city, Reifer is also being honored locally

by Wallace Mayor Dick Vester, who proclaimed April 17 as ‘Hans Reifer Day’.

The Reifer family arrived in New York City on January 8th, 1941 not speaking a word of English. Reifer’s father had several connections, fortunately, in the investment banking industry and so the family was able to survive despite the initial language barrier.

Reifer stayed after school to learn English along with other immigrants, going on to the Bronx HS of Science, one of the top high schools in New York City. He eventually graduated from UC Berkeley in 1952 at the age of 20, receiving his Bachelor of Science in food technology. He went on to receive an MBA from Harvard Business School.

But, it was at that point, war caught up with him again—he was drafted into the US Army for the Korean War. Reifer, who never deployed, was stationed in Utah with the Chemical Corps and spent 21 months and seven days working in biological warfare, putting in two years of service on the dot.

After finishing his service, Reifer was accepted into the Harvard Business School after a family member suggested that receiving an MBA is just something one does at that point in his life.

“I was so out of place there,” Reifer said. “I didn’t have a tie—only a tweed coat.”

But, out of the three Berkeley classmates who went to Harvard with him, Reifer, who described himself as the oddball of the class, was the only one to end up receiving his MBA. As a result of that hard work, Reifer went on to work for some of the top corporations in the United States such as Pillsbury, Lipton, and Carnation, which was later acquired by Nestlé in 1985. He even ran his own consulting company called Reifer and Associates in Los Angeles where he recalled how nice it was to be his own boss.

During his time spent in the food industry, his work took him to Louisville, Idaho Falls (he ran a potato processing plant for Pillsbury there), Minneapolis, and Southern California. But, he always had one side passion that has stuck with him all these years. “Everywhere I worked, my avocation was skiing,” Reifer said with a laugh. He is still an active, energetic, and sharp 82-year-old who continues to ski—he put in 103 days on the mountain this past winter season. He was also finally able to turn that passion into a business venture in 1999 when he became part owner of Lookout Pass Ski and Recreation Area.

Reifer was the ski school director at Ski Sunrise, now known as Mountain High, in Southern California, where Phil Edholm, current president and CEO of Lookout Pass, was the general manager. Edholm left California and ended up reaching out to Reifer, along with others, to buy Lookout Pass. Reifer agreed to the deal and moved to Silverton in 2002.

“Out of all the ski areas I’ve seen — and I’ve seen a lot, Lookout has by far been the best,” Reifer said. “And, I’ve never seen a guy with so much skiing knowledge as Phil.”

Reifer, who in 2012 was presented a ‘Living Legend’ award by the Professional Ski Instructors Association, passed down his passion for skiing to his children as well. His daughter now writes for Ski Magazine and his son makes trips out to Lookout twice a year to ski with his father.

“I was always impressed with Hans because he has a great business sense,” Edholm said. “He had that passion for the ski industry that I did as well.”

The city of Wallace will join Reifer’s home country in recognizing him next week when April 17 officially becomes ‘Hans Reifer Day’. Reifer and his wife will spend roughly a week in Vienna—the highlight of the trip will be meeting the mayor of the city and Chancellor of Austria Werner Faymann.