

Local IAFF 3438 Stair Climb Team Honors Robert Johnson

North County Regional Fire Authority is proud to share the story of Robert Johnson, who has been selected by Local IAFF 3438's Stair Climb Team as this year's honoree for the 2026 Firefighter Stairclimb. This annual event raises funds to fight cancers such as leukemia and lymphoma, and Robert's life of service and dedication makes him an inspiring figure for this cause.

Robert Johnson's story is one of curiosity, innovation, and commitment to community. From an early age, Robert demonstrated a mechanical curiosity that shaped his life's work. As a junior high student, he built a hydroplane for shop class. By junior high school, he had completed a remarkable project—a 36-foot, two-story boat, powered by a HEMI engine. constructed in his parents' driveway. When the boat was transported to the water, it floated perfectly on its first launch.

Robert pursued his passion for engineering through higher education, graduating from the University of Washington with a degree in Aeronautical Engineering. His love for aviation grew during his time working in the university's wind tunnel facility, eventually leading him to earn his private pilot's license.

In 1966, Robert began his career at Boeing during the construction of the Everett facility—the largest building in the world by volume—where the iconic 747 would be built.

Robert Wayne Johnson and Kathleen Bunnell Johnson were married on September 12, 1970. They were married 55 years on September 12, 2025. Over the next five decades, Robert contributed to the development of nearly every major Boeing commercial aircraft, including the 737, 747, 757, 767, 777, and the 787 Dreamliner. Rising through the ranks, he became a Senior Technical Fellow and managed critical fuselage static tests for the 787 program before retiring in 2010. Robert worked for Boeing for a total of 51 years. Even after retirement, Robert continued to share his expertise as a consultant with Boeing's Preliminary Design Group.

Beyond his professional achievements, Robert devoted himself to aviation and community service. He volunteered at the Arlington Fly-In—later known as SkyFest—for 53 years, serving as a board member for 35 of those years and as Fly-In Director for many. His leadership and mentorship shaped the event and inspired countless volunteers. Robert also shared his love of flight through the Experimental Aircraft Association's Young Eagles program, giving dozens of local youth their first experience in the air.

Robert's dedication extended to his family and community. He built a 4,000-square-foot home for his family in 1980 and worked tirelessly to support loved ones in times of need. His generosity and commitment were evident in every aspect of his life.

In August 2025, Robert faced a sudden health challenge and was later diagnosed with Stage 4 esophageal cancer. Despite this, he remained deeply connected to the community he loved. On October 5, 2025, Robert visited Station 48 to meet the IAFF 3438 Stair Climb Team and tour the station—a day that brought him great joy. That same day, he reunited with friends and fellow volunteers at the Arlington Fly-In hangar, sharing memories and laughter.

Robert passed away peacefully on October 20, 2025, surrounded by family. He is survived by his wife, Kathleen, their 2 sons, Kevin and Keith, and 1 grandson. Robert's legacy lives on through his contributions to aviation, his decades of volunteer service, and the countless lives he touched with his kindness and mentorship.

As the IAFF 3438 Stair Climb Team prepares for the 2026 event, they will climb in Robert's honor—celebrating a life defined by innovation, service, and love for community.



Pictured here, NCRFA Firefighter Paramedic, Keith Johnson and his wife, Candace, with Keith's father, Robert Johnson.



Robert enjoyed a visit to Station 48 in October, 2025.