

MARC ANDERSON LAWSON, 42,
TALKS WITH HIS SISTER,
KAREN LAWSON, 45, ABOUT THEIR
FATHER, VIDEO GAME INVENTOR
JERRY LAWSON.

Marc Anderson Lawson: Growing up, no matter where you were in our house, you could hear Dad's keys jingle at the door. And as soon as we heard that, we would just get up from wherever we were and run to hug Dad. He'd pick us up and pretend like he was King Kong: "Aaaahhhh!" [*Laughter.*] He was a big kid.

Karen Lawson: [*Laughs.*] Yeah, he was. Our dad was six foot six—I mean, he walks into a room and he's filling up the doorway. And he was a great storyteller. He would have folks hanging on his words. And he told it to you straight, no chase. He'd say, "The truth is the truth, and the world doesn't sugarcoat it for you, so I'm not going to do that in my own home."

Marc: Dad grew up in the South Jamaica, Queens, projects,

which was a rough environment. But my grandfather was really big into science, and he got my father interested in science, too. Dad was always into doing things that were different. He got into electronics at an early age, and he started fixing television sets when he was, like, sixteen or seventeen years old. He talked a lot about how his teacher sat him next to a poster of George Washington Carver and said, "You can be this great!"

He went to Queens College for about a year or two, and then left and went out to Palo Alto, California, to pursue what he loved.

Karen: He had a natural curiosity for things that ticked and moved—he was a tinkerer. And that grew into a career. When we were kids, our father invented the first cartridge-based home video game system, called the Fairchild Channel F. I mean, his intelligence was off the charts.

Marc: We grew up in a suburb of San Francisco called Santa Clara, and some of my earliest memories are of us playing video games together on the Channel F. There was *Maze*, *Blackjack*—*Tic-Tac-Toe* was a fun one, too. If you lost, at the bottom it would say, "You lose, Turkey"! That was Dad's thing. [*Laughs.*] We never knew till we were grown that we were really just debugging the games. He was like, "Just give them to the kids and let them play." He got some free labor out of us! [*Laughs.*]

But you know, when you think about it, we were some of the first children—really, *the* first kids—to play

interchangeable cartridges on a video game system on the planet Earth. Because this was a year prior to Atari coming out—so this was historic. But I mean, our friends would just come over and we'd play these games.

Dad had this huge lab in our garage. You ever see an episode of *Star Trek* where you see everyone sitting around the consoles? That's what the lab looked like to me as a child. There was a computer about the size of a refrigerator called a PDP-11, with big tape wheels on it that spun around. And then there might be eight to ten other computers, all working on different things networked together. And just electronic parts all over the place. Because Dad was not only constructing things; he would also take things apart to see how they were done.

I used to be embarrassed because when my friends would come over, they would see all this equipment in there and be like, "What the hell is that stuff?" And then we had maybe five or six large antennas outside the house, and people were like, "What are you guys trying to do, launch a satellite or something?!"

But you know, his work was his hobby, and his hobby was his work. And I think that had a lot of influence on me.

I remember the summer our cousin Manu came, and all we wanted to do was play video games. But Dad took them away, and he gave us a book on how to program video games—and he *forced* us to figure out how to make our own games. *Mad Libs* was really big around that time, so Manu and I made a

CALLINGS

Mad Libs game using one of the computers Dad had. It actually worked! We thought it was so cool. I must have been twelve, but just that *one* summer, it changed the whole trajectory of my life.

So when I first went to college, I was like, *What could I do for a living that I would want to do for free?* I thought about it and I said, *Well, I like to program. I'd do that for free.* And that's what made me get into software development.

Karen: Wow, I never knew that. But I think that speaks to Dad's personality and who he was.

Marc: Yeah, I always felt an inner drive to do great because of him. He would help me through a lot of the projects that I was working on, and it was exciting because we had this bond.

When I finished graduate school and started looking for work, I ended up getting a great opportunity, and I said, "OK, this is it." I told Mom and Dad both about the interview, and they were excited for me; Dad was *really* excited. He's like, "You'll get the job."

Karen: And he was right.

Marc: Yeah, but he just didn't get to see the end result.

Dad was a diabetic, and there was a point where he was really sick and he had to stop working. He eventually had to have his leg amputated just below the knee, and then went into a wheelchair—and I think that had a huge effect on him. His eyesight also started to fail because he had macular degeneration, and he lost one of his eyes. So now he only has one eye,

GROUNDBREAKERS

one leg—and he had to move around in a wheelchair. Well, that's pretty difficult when you're used to doing a lot of things on your own. Then the doctor said something about him having to lose the other leg, and having to have kidney dialysis. So that would have meant that he would spend a majority of his waking hours doing the dialysis. And because he's so mathematical, Dad figured out that he'd only have *one* quality hour per day. I remember he said to me, "What kind of life is that?" He said he'd rather go. And he passed away in 2011.

Karen: When he did pass, as sad as it was, we both knew that he lived a full life. Dad was a man without limitations as far as what he felt he could accomplish.

Marc: And he was a man who went his own path. If everyone was going right, he'd figure out a good reason to go left. That was just him. He created his own destiny, and that's a fantastic legacy.

RECORDED IN ATLANTA, GEORGIA,
ON OCTOBER 12, 2014.

