

# UW-Stout: Alum's inspiring legacy will continue with scholarship, professorship in his name

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UW-Stout alum John “Jed” Copham, who had a passion for racing cars and motorsports, was the owner of Brainerd International Raceway in Brainerd, Minn., when he died in 2018.

JERRY POLING | NOVEMBER 30, 2021

In many ways, John “Jed” Copham epitomized how a life should be lived — make the best use of your talents, enjoy each day to its fullest and along the way enrich the lives of those around you.

Gifted as an engineer, mechanic and athlete; energetic, hard-working, humble and kind; and someone whose efforts and example inspired others, Copham made a difference wherever he went.

Although his days were cut short by a boating accident in 2018 at age 46, his almost larger-than-life impact continues — and not just through the example he set as a person and as the popular owner of Brainerd International Raceway in Brainerd, Minn.

Recently, his sister, Kristen “Mae” Copham, donated \$1 million to University of Wisconsin-Stout to create the John “Jed” Copham Memorial Engineering Scholarship and a separate professorship also under his name.

UW-Stout is celebrating National Giving Day with its third annual [Stout Gives](#)

[Back](#) event on Tuesday, Nov. 30.



Mae Copham hugs her brother, Jed. / Contributed photo

Jed graduated from UW-Stout in 1997 with a bachelor's degree in [industrial technology](#).

Beginning with the 2022-23 academic year, three students in engineering and

technology programs each will receive a \$5,000 scholarship. A professor from the same department will receive summer pay and other financial support for an approved professional development experience, with a priority in motorsports or automobile research.

“It means a lot to me to be able to do something to help other people and honor him,” Mae said. “We miss him a ton. No one will ever fill that hole, but it feels appropriate to remember him by helping others achieve their dreams.”

Mae wanted to use funds generated from the sale of the family business, Liberty Check Printers based in Shoreview, Minn., to make a substantial donation to an organization connected to Jed.

“Jed was a big reason our family business was successful. He worked there for 20 years starting from age 13 and contributed so much creativity and resourcefulness to the operations,” she said.

With his engineering background, Jed helped design several mechanical improvements that were integral to the company’s success. He contributed to three patents that his dad received.

“He was always inventing things with my dad to make the process better,” Mae said, such as a machine to automate the process of printing the numbers at the bottom of the checks. “He had what we called magic hands. He’d make it work.

“The joke was, at Christmas, Dad would put things together and Jed would fix them,” she said, adding that at 7 years old Jed took a watch apart and put it back together.

“He was plain-spoken but a genius at how things worked,” Mae said.

### **Living out his passion as track owner**

Jed’s real passion, however, was motorsports, including racing motocross cycles in high school and competitive drag racing in Brainerd while in college. He had a chance to live out that passion when his family, from Forest Lake, Minn., sold Liberty Check Printers in 2005.

In 2006, Jed and his wife, Kristi, bought the iconic Brainerd International Raceway.



Alum Jed Copham, who was a “total daredevil,” does a backflip with a jet ski. / Contributed photo

At BIR, Jed was in his element. He made major improvements that solidified the 600-acre facility as one of the best in the Upper Midwest, where tens of thousands of spectators are not uncommon for large NHRA — [National Hot Rod Association](#) — events.

The track also hosts drag racing, superbike racing, endurance events, car shows and more.

In a Brainerd Dispatch story a decade after he bought the track, Jed said, “ “If someone would have told me back then that I would own this place one day, I would actually have believed that. This place is such a part of me and where my passion lies.”

He was a hands-on owner, cleaning restrooms, mowing the lawn — whatever it took to get the job done and improve the driver and spectator experience, Mae said.

“He was very humble and down to earth. He was on the job with his hands dirty and working, not all spiffed up. He was never above any task, just a regular guy,” she said, adding that Jed “would describe himself as a bit of a redneck.”

Once, Jed almost missed the start of his race because he was working on a competitor’s engine, she said. “He would drop anything to help someone.”

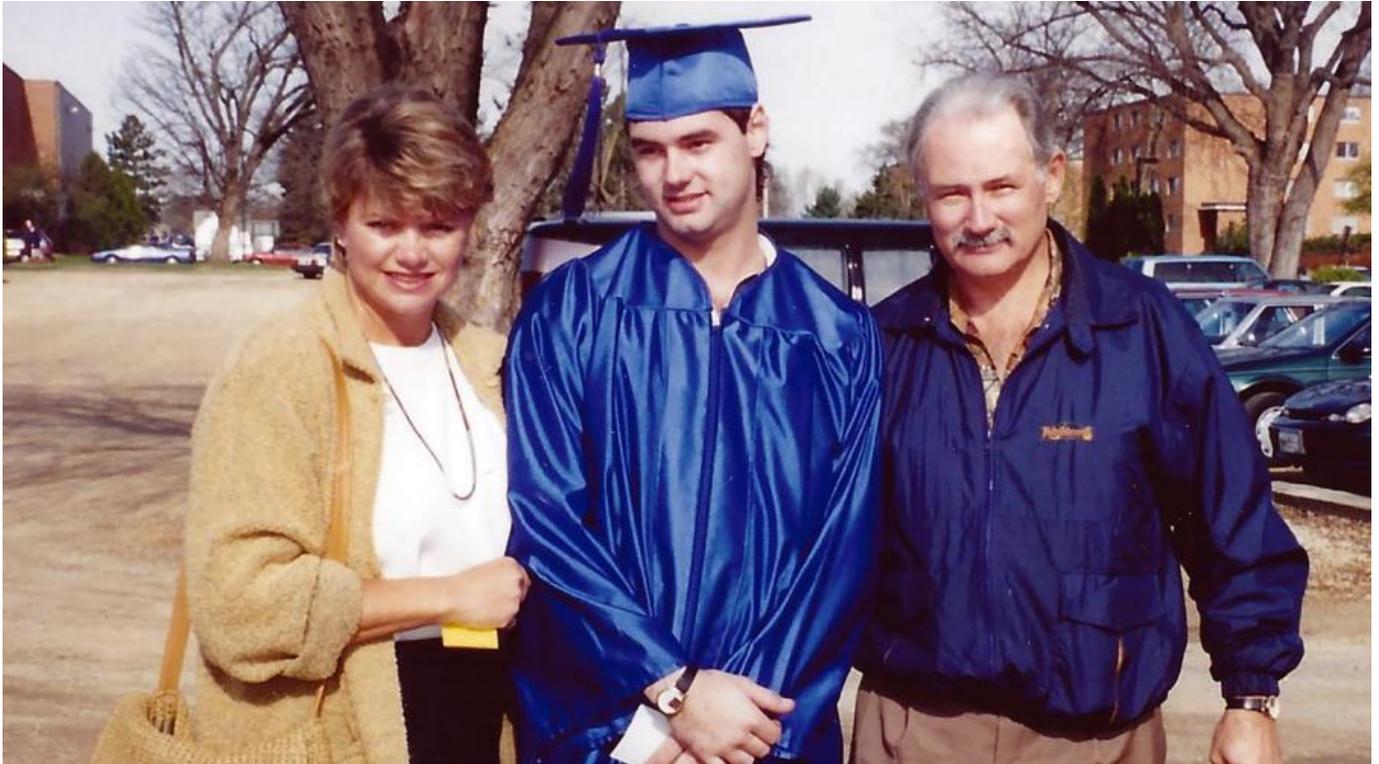
He owned race cars and raced regularly at BIR, including in Sports Car Club of America events and the Trans Am series. He also raced snowmobiles in International Watercross Association events.

“He was a total daredevil, usually with speed,” Mae said. “He was one of handful of people in the world who could do backflips on a standing jet ski in still water.”

### **UW-Stout made a difference in his life**

Mae said Jed wasn’t necessarily a dedicated student in high school. Going to college wasn’t high on his list. However, his parents Dave and Cheryl stressed the need for education.

One day another worker at Liberty asked the teenage Jed if he was planning to operate a noisy printing press for the next 40 years, telling him he could do more with his life. After high school and a year of working nights full time at Liberty, Jed took the advice of his co-worker and parents. He decided to go to college and enrolled at UW-Stout, although he continued to work weekends at Liberty.



Jed Copham with his parents, Cheryl and Dave, on graduation day at UW-Stout in 1997. / Contributed photo

“He just put his head down and did it,” Mae said, although as the older sibling who already had a degree from St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minn., she came to campus once to help him with an English paper. “Once I explained that he had to write differently than he spoke, he got it. He passed the class without my help after that.”

Dave Copham said Jed’s [“mechanical engineering”](#) studies provided him with the expertise to develop problem-solving strategies” at Liberty while Jed still was in college, including a computer-aided design senior project that led to the company’s purchase of a new print-on-demand press.

Provisions within the scholarship are a nod to Jed. Students with a grade point average of 2.0 and higher will be eligible, and those involved in auto or motorsports projects or clubs are encouraged to apply.

UW-Stout’s [Robert F. Cervenka School of Engineering](#) has five engineering programs.

Jed’s experience at UW-Stout included a professor who changed his way of thinking

and ultimately his approach to life. It's one reason Mae supported the professorship as a second way to give back through the university.

"The professor gave Jed some ideas about life and people that he hadn't considered before. It shifted Jed a little bit. I know Jed appreciated having an opportunity to learn a lot of the things he did at Stout," Mae said.

The donation was made through the [Stout University Foundation](#), which this fall awarded more than \$977,000 in scholarships for the 2021-22 academic year, a record annual amount. A total of 436 students received the awards.

Since 1963, the Foundation Scholarship Program has helped 10,882 students receive a college education with scholarships totaling more than \$15.6 million.