

The Life of Ken Keep

Ken Keep was born on March 22nd, 1944 at the Fort Monmouth army post in central New Jersey. He was the first grandchild on his mother's side and a cause for celebration for the Cumming family. Family lore has it that Ken's grandfather, Kenneth Neal, had a telegram sent to his uncle Arvin, who was then stationed in Italy, writing that they had "received a package" that day- a surreptitious announcement that Ken Keep had been born. As a baby, Ken and his parents, Jean Cumming and Harry Keep lived in Long Branch, just a few miles east of the base. When the war ended in 1945 the family moved to Houston, Texas.

As a boy, Ken was bright, energetic and self-assured. Both comfortable doing his own thing and glad to be the center of attention. In kindergarten, when Ken's teacher requested a conference with his mom, Jean worried that Ken had acted out. But when they arrived at the meeting, young Ken confidently introduced his mom and his teacher; making room for his teacher to gush to Jean about what a nice boy Ken was.

Jean and Harry divorced when Ken was 10, and Jean would remarry, to Jack Heacock, who she'd met at the Unitarian church there in Houston. Not long after, Jack was transferred, bringing Ken and Jean with him to Metairie, Louisiana, while Ken's father Harry remained in Houston, where he was from. In Metairie, a growing suburb just northwest of New Orleans, Ken was a sea scout, launching his lifelong love of boats, as he learned to sail there on brackish, windy waters of Lake Pontchartrain.

In 1961, the family moved again, leaving the waterfront town that Ken loved, and settling in Washington DC. Ken and his stepfather never got along particularly well and when Ken graduated from high school the following year, he enlisted in the Navy, drawn perhaps by the possible distance and the promise of more time on the water. He was assigned to massive naval ships, a far cry from the small crafts he loved, but stayed put, aware that reassignment would likely send him to Vietnam. A highlight of his service was being selected for the honor guard for President John F. Kennedy when he was lying in state in DC. Ken would say that he learned to sleep standing up during that time; a point of pride, in Ken's way. He began, too, to develop his prowess with computers, which he'd make good use of in the years to come.

Ken finished his four-year tour and opted not to reenlist. After visiting family on the east coast, Ken returned to Houston, where his father Harry was still living. He quickly got a job at a computer lab at the University of Houston; and along with Tom, his friend from the Navy, became involved in the Young Adult group at the Unitarian church. The young adult group was a sort of landing place, and a deeply supportive community. And Ken was a real presence there. He took to a memorable purple Nehru jacket, the first of his trademarks, that he wore with the pride of a uniform. But just as memorable were his warmth and encouragement, which invited others more fully into themselves in that formative phase of life.

It was a dynamic time- Ken and friends were deeply shaped by the cultural and political turbulence and transformation that were underway around them. In addition to going on expeditions, or to movies, they attended demonstrations, for peace and civil rights, soaking up the energies of the moment.

In 1968, Ken traveled to both coasts- making a formative visit to California and a trip to New York, where he participated in the student demonstrations at Columbia. Back in Houston, Ken and his friends could feel an undercurrent of discomfort, in a city that didn't necessarily embrace their beliefs or aesthetics. Ken and Tom hatched a plan to head to San Francisco, where their Navy buddy Roger lived. And within months of arrival, they would pay forward Roger's hospitality, encouraging their friend [Devi], and others from the Houston church, to join them.

Ken and his crew, many from the Houston young adult group, gravitated right to First Unitarian Universalist Society. Barely six months after landing in San Francisco, Ken became a member of the congregation. He and his friends would be instrumental in founding the Rufus T. Cutler Chowder and Marching Society, named after one of the least known ministers of the church. This young adult group, too, was tight knit. Sharing hikes in Marin and picnics at Ocean Beach, showing up together as the youngest cohort at Sunday services, and participating in anti-war demonstrations through the society and beyond. In and outside of the congregation, Ken loved creating opportunities to get people together and connected.

Alongside his work as a computer technician, Ken developed his lifelong love of photography, including a stint as a photographer for George McGovern's presidential campaign. Around the time he turned thirty, Ken moved for a time to Stockton and shortly thereafter to Modesto, marrying his first wife, Lynn. In Modesto, Ken worked for a time as a landscaper, a photographer and a paramedic. Alongside his friend Linda Hutchinson, Ken took classes in search and rescue in the Sierra Nevada, and would work for a time on a medical rescue helicopter that would routinely make trips to the Yosemite Valley.

Ken and Lynn would divorce, and Ken would return to San Francisco in 1980. He found a home with longtime friend Michael McKinely, in a communal household there in old Victorian on Ashbury Street. He loved the house; the rotating chores, and the experience of living like family.

Ken worked for several years in a series of bakeries in Cole Valley, including an Italian spot that he swore had the best cannolis of all time. Ever curious, and self-starting, always up for a challenge, he continued to nurture other skills and passions along the way, enabling him to take independent gigs as a handyman, a photographer and a stage manager. He found a particular niche photographing and supporting Polynesian and Middle Eastern dance performances. In the belly dancing community, Ken is remembered as an incredibly supportive presence, whether he was behind the camera, calming nerves, or making sure everyone had what they needed, he did it with a dependable grace- and his signature Hawaiian shirts.

In his mid 50s, Ken married again, to a fellow member of the Unitarian Universalist Society, Karen Norman. When they split a year later, Ken gratefully moved in with dear friend Linda Harris for a time. In the aftermath of this painful divorce, Ken's friends would connect him to two things that would become central features of the rest of his life: The apartment he'd live in for the next twenty years; and what he would go on to describe as the best job he ever had. Through longtime friends Jean and Henry Kroll, Ken was invited to apply for a role at the Sequoias retirement community. Officially, his job was to staff the reception desk and drive residents for outings and lunches, but as might not surprise anyone here, his role at Sequoias expanded to meet his exuberance.

Ken became a tour guide, applying his expertise and enthusiasm for finding hidden gems-- that skill that made him such a lovely host to visiting friends and family over the years, to create unforgettable excursions for the residents. Even a simple trip to lunch would include fun facts about the restaurant, the history of the neighborhood and the nearby architecture. A stack of boxes in his garage contained a store of newspaper clippings, flyers, and notes with tips and ideas for future outings- a physical manifestation of the font of knowledge that Ken was, not just about San Francisco, but the surrounding areas too.

At the front desk, Ken was concierge and a confidant, consistently developing close connections, with residents, and their families, too. Required to wear a tie to work for the first time in his life, Ken developed what he'd describe as a "mild obsession" with wacky and whimsical neckties. Between memorial ties, gifts from residents and friends, and a decade and a half of careful curation, Ken's tie collection grew into the thousands. The favorites hung around his room- with others were relegated to boxes, brought out for public display on more than one occasion. When Ken retired in 2017, he near seamlessly remained part of the fabric of the Sequoias community, visiting occasionally and joining in some outings as a welcome guest tour guide.

The generous spirit that made Ken so beloved at the Sequoias, showed up in all of his relationships. Whether he was washing the dishes at the end of a meal, meeting a friend's mother at the airport to keep her company on a layover, or showing up to coffee hour each Sunday with a gallon of milk to supplant the unworthy powdered creamer, Ken was forever noticing the details, stepping up and sticking around until the job was done. It's no surprise then, that so many friends describe Ken as family- a surrogate father, brother or uncle.

Hours with Ken passed easily. His intelligence and curiosity meant he could talk about almost anything. His love of boats and classic cars, and his near encyclopedic knowledge of San Francisco were common topics, but he'd gladly follow other trains of thought. And listen, too, while he shared meals, went for drives, or sat together at the water with those closest to him. His exuberance and buoyancy drew acquaintances in too. On Sunday mornings at UUSF, often having picked up another member en route, he'd be found perched at the edge of a table or bench, with a cluster of others, mostly women, gathered around him, deep in conversation.

When shelter in place began, an undeniably tough time, and more so for someone as extroverted as Ken, he podded with close friends Seph Paul and Cathy Lyon, and was deliberate in keeping in touch with other friends by phone, as well as reconnecting with family and people from different parts of his life. Not much of a cook, but always up for a challenge, Ken started making soup. Though someone gifted him a new TV, he never turned it on, satisfying his inquisitiveness instead through what he'd call internet rabbit holes and sharing findings with friends through email at all hours of the night.

On January 12th, Ken was hospitalized for bacterial pneumonia that proved unresponsive to the antibiotics. And so within a matter of days, Ken Keep died. With little warning, suddenly and unexpectedly he left this physical world- and the many, many people who love him.

Ken, you've been such a gift to so many- and surely will be, in your memory too. May your extraordinary life continue to be a blessing in all of the lives gathered here, and the lives of all those who have been touched in some way by your presence.