

Robert O'Neill Jr. ⁵⁹


Mystic - My brother, Robert O'Neill Jr., a resident of the Mystic area for over 50 years, and well known for his professional career, his community involvement, and his colorful personality, died on Thursday, Oct. 4, 2018, of an unexpected heart attack at Lawrence + Memorial Hospital. He had lived at Academy Point for several years since leaving his beloved house on West Mystic Avenue due to health concerns.

Bob was the first-born of the five children of Robert F. and Elizabeth (Fitzpatrick) O'Neill, growing up in the seaside town of Swampscott, Mass. A very self-motivated and conscientious student, he was always an avid reader, hungry for knowledge, especially in science. In the 1940s, he often accompanied his father on volunteer community services such as paper drives, and he always had weekend and summer jobs, spending his money mostly on books and electronics. Bob graduated from Swampscott High School as valedictorian of his 1955 class, and attended Williams College, earning a B.A. in physics in 1959. He remained a faithful and generous alumnus of the college all his life.

Bob wrote for his Williams 50th class reunion publication: "After Williams, I was accepted into the University of Washington where I managed to avoid being drafted and get an M.S. in physics. I also learned to live on less than one hundred dollars a month, thanks to Mrs. Pepper's Boarding House, supplanted by playing banjo and singing (badly) at the Pamir Coffee House in return for food...Returning to New England in 1961, I again barely slipped out of the Army's grasp by accepting the offer of a 'critical-skills job' at the Electric Boat Division of General Dynamics in Groton. The job-conducting research in techniques used to quiet nuclear submarines- anchored my future career in the field of acoustics and sonar, as well as my residence in southeastern Connecticut for many decades...I went across the Thames River in 1965 to the Navy Underwater Sound Laboratory in New London, a wonderful government R&D facility which, since its founding in the early years of World War II in response to the German submarine threat, had developed all the U.S. Navy's submarine sonars..."

In New London, Bob had a wide range of responsibilities, including preparing special reports in high-interest areas, and planning and administrating the Navy's submarine and surface ship sonar research program. He was also the environmental point man, making sure all programs were in compliance with federal and local environmental laws and regulations. Bob found time to teach a physics lab for undergraduates at the University of CT at Avery Point in Groton, and to earn an M.A. in Public Administration in 1987 from the University of Northern Colorado, taking classwork in CT. As his brother, I was going through countless home files, and found evidence of Bob's having taken 55 graduate and Navy-sponsored courses between 1966 and 1991. He was given an award for "significant accomplishment" by NUSC in 1988, followed by three "Letters of Appreciation" and a cash performance award. Bob also received a Patents Award in 1993 (with Dr. Judith Snow) for improvements in coding for laser-based navigational range systems. During his career, according to a number of his colleagues, he also was known for his patience and his teaching and mentoring skills, giving help wherever it was needed...Bob wrote, "I retired from the Naval Undersea Warfare Center in 1999, and joined a small company called Flight Safety Technologies Inc., engaged in development of a ground-based system for acoustically tracking the motion of potentially dangerous air turbulence generated by landing aircraft..."

Despite his demanding career and varied outside interests, Bob found time to give back to his community in many roles. I found filing cabinets full of his work on the Groton Zoning Commission, which awarded him a "Length of Service Award" for his dozen years there (1994 to 2006). Many of his volunteer positions reflected his strong interest in the environment and in human rights. He was co-founder and a president of the Mystic River-Whitford Brook Watershed Association, a member of the Mystic River Park Commission and the Groton Open Space Task Force. He volunteered for the United Way, was on the Board of Directors of the Southeastern Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, and was vice-chairperson for the Human Rights Committee of the Region 6 Connecticut Department of Mental Retardation. Always a supporter of women's rights, he was active in N.O.W. and the E.R.A. fight, once receiving a note from Sen. Lowell Weicker thanking him for his letter supporting abortion rights. In the late seventies, Bob was on the new NUSC Federal Women's Program Advisory Council concerned with the equal opportunity for women in government. In 2008, he was recognized by the Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center for his 10 years of continued support.

My brother was a brilliant and complicated man, who relished both the domestic tranquility of living alone sans kids and pets (although I was always amazed how much both were drawn to "Big Bird" as he was known to his many young relatives...), and also his rich social life, exchanging ideas with his many diverse friends in the bars, on boats, in his role as an auxiliary state trooper, taking classes in wine, French and navigation, volunteering at the aquarium...I was surprised to find out about his interest in running when I found one drawer full (and they were ALL full...) of road race numbers. He left behind hundreds of photos and slides of his life and travels (Africa, China, Brazil, Japan?...) and many musical instruments, from banjos to a didgeridoo. Not that he needed an instrument to make "music" which many could attest to, having heard Bob "play" at a bar or party...Some might suspect that quite a few of Bob's interests and participation at many art, music, and literary events and fundraisers were related to his favorite interest, meeting the fairer sex. I believe that his success in that field was due more to his strong, innate respect for women than to his good

looks and quick wit...

"Through a half century of flagrant heterosexuality and massive contributions to the restaurant and bar industry, I discovered that I was not cut out for the commitments and baggage of marriage. Fortunately, I learned that lesson before actually trying it, so I have no alimony payments and no regrets- except for the problem of finding someone to assist me as my memory, mobility, and money dwindle..."

Another of Bob's loves was language, word play, and good writing in any genre, be it research or the tongue-in-cheek / outraged letters-to-the-editor he was fond of sending out. I found a good number of notes back to him from the journalists Ellen Goodman and Dave Barry. Bob would send the latter excerpts from inane Navy periodicals (one was a study of the sex life of emus using radio frequencies), and Barry would return postcards with hilarious comments. "The Day" had more than a few of Bob's pithy letters over the years.

Whatever the interest or subject, my brother would jump in with both feet, doing the research and writing copious notes. As an example, I found notebooks of handwritten Chinese characters he transcribed, to learn Mandarin for his China trip...He was always meticulously prepared for whatever the job, trip or event, making checklists and getting the best gear. And he kept it ALL, which must be a genetic trait as he was not alone in this, unfortunately...Bob's sense of humor made him a very entertaining cohort in any social situation, especially after a wine or two. He was generous to his friends and to the causes he supported, but he did not suffer fools gladly, and used an acerbic wit to vanquish those who might be a vexation to his usually kind-hearted soul. I shall miss him. Slainte, Robert...

Bob was predeceased by his parents; by his sister, Elizabeth "Bunny" Hannaway and her husband, Dr. Paul Hannaway, and their son, his nephew, Craig Hannaway.

He leaves behind his brother, Brian F. O'Neill of Ipswich, Mass; his sisters, Nancy Lee and her husband, Robert and their two sons, of Gloucester, Mass. and Pauline and her two sons in Freedom, Calif.; and a crowd of nephews, nieces, and cousins.

The family wants to especially thank John Archibald of Mystic. Archie was a faithful friend for over 50 years, and was an indispensable help all through Bob's travails, checking in with him on his health and finances, keeping the empty house up and running, and helping Brian with advice and counsel.

Arrangements locally were by the Mystic Funeral Home. Bob's remains will go to a family plot in Brookline, Mass. No services will be held.

There will be a celebration of Bob's life for his friends and colleagues from 5 to 7 p.m. Wednesday, Nov. 14, at the Waterford Country Club, Langley's Restaurant, 28 Lamphere Road, in Waterford. Bring your stories! (Cash bar, coffee, tea, soda, finger desserts.)

Funeral Home

Mystic Funeral Home - Mystic

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