

Walter C. Lenk Memorial Minute

Walter C. Lenk, born March 26, 1947, died peacefully October 7, 2022 in the comfort of his Cambridge home with Debby Knight, his longtime partner in life, music, and dance at his side.

Walter grew up in a former Quaker Meeting House in Chadds Ford, PA, was a member of Birmingham Meeting, and attended Westtown School, an experience that had a major impact on his life. His early spiritual life included a connection to the outdoors with Scouting summer canoe trips, especially in the Quetico-Superior wilderness area.

In 1967, after one year of college, Walter relocated to the Boston area as a Conscientious Objector during the Vietnam War, serving primarily in the respiratory therapy department at Beth Israel Hospital. The vibrant music scene and the many people with shared interests he encountered led him to put down permanent roots in the Cambridge community. He volunteered at the American Friends Service Committee, and in 1976 he and a friend bought a Victorian house on Broadway, which remained his home until the end of his life.

In 1969 from his diary, Walter wrote of just one of his many adventurous wanderings. "From Philadelphia I traveled to Washington DC and stayed at 'William Penn House'. While in Washington I went to the Senate and visited FCNL [Friends Committee on National Legislation]. Later when I got home, I hitched to FGC [Friends General Conference] in Wilmington, Ohio after the bike's transmission blew up in Cambridge. I got a ride back to Long Island with a FGC family, and then hitched home."

In the mid 1970's Walter was attending Friends Meeting at Cambridge (FMC) and met with other Young Adult Friends from FMC in a worship group – including current FMC members Bill Satterthwaite and Wendy Sanford, who have fond memories of that time. He served on Ministry and Counsel, Membership, and Oversight and Fellowship Committees.

Walter's life sometimes felt like a Who's Who of the 70's. At one point he "had started doing private secretarial work for Daniel Ellsberg, and . . . had occasional use of his BMW car when he was away."

Walter worked repairing, designing, and building sound equipment. He served Boston Symphony Orchestra musicians, Tom Rush, Aerosmith, venues such as Sanders Theater and Carnegie Hall, and festivals such as New Orleans Jazz and Heritage, Brandywine, Wheatlands, Mariposa, and the Great Hudson River Revival where he became friends with Pete and Toshi Seeger.

Through those experiences he was introduced to old-time music and dance as well as contra and square dancing, which became a decades-long passion. Walter began calling dances and writing new ones. He was part of dances at FMC and Cambridge

Friends School. Ever generous and playful with his sound engineering skills, Walter helped friends and neighbors create rousing block parties in the era of Saturday Night Fever, providing a sound system that moved young and old out to the street, where they line danced for hours.

It was through music that Walter met Debby Knight. She had been told Walter had sound equipment for musicians and wanted his help, but figured she should meet him first. When she asked him to dance, he turned her down. Soon, however, their lives interwove. Although Debby was never officially a Quaker, her promotion of Quaker values through her 42 years at Cambridge Friends School meshed well with Walter's experience as a Friend.

Singing squares were a regular part of Walter's repertoire. When health issues prevented him from taking a more active role in the dance community over time, he continued to enjoy the social connections and the opportunity to call a few singing squares at the contradance in Carlisle, MA until a few years ago.

As diabetes and Multiple Sclerosis impacted his ability to continue much of his earlier work, Walter gracefully navigated those changes, finding ways to follow his passions while reinventing his work life. He enjoyed researching the history of his Cambridge neighborhood and interviewing numerous people who had been involved in Boston-area contra dancing in the 1970s and assembling an archive of their stories.

Walter did not attend meeting when his health started deteriorating but enjoyed talking about the meeting and his memories of his past Quaker experiences, especially Westtown. Over the past decade, he developed deeper connections to Westtown, creating an active class email list focused on reunions, then collecting and assembling information from classmates to create a 50th Reunion Book. He also enjoyed the occasional visits with current Westtown staff who made trips to New England to connect with alums, and through that process shared stories and contributed photos to the school archives.

Walter embodied the generosity, dry wit, and graciousness for which so many of us knew him. He gave a sense of truly listening to us. His stories and ability to engage people on wide flung topics from electronics to history to music and dance were a gift to all of us, attested to by the number and diversity of attendees at his memorial service. Contractors who had worked on his house on Broadway were there, as was a former health care worker who traveled from Virginia to attend. Walter will be missed.

In addition to Debby, his beloved and loving partner of 40 years, Walter is survived by his sister Larhken Carroll of Oakland, CA and brothers Ted Lenk (and sister-in-law

Susan Weaver) of Nelson, NH, Gabrell Carroll of Swoope, VA, and Charles Lenk of Oakland, CA.

A memorial service was held at Friends Meeting Cambridge, 5 Longfellow Park on Saturday, October 29, 2022.