

Oxford, Maryland:

Alan Stewart Thorndike died in Easton, Maryland, on Monday, January 8, 2018. For three decades Alan suffered from Parkinson's disease, which one could witness in the form of tremors but would never hear of in the form of complaints. An aggressive pneumonia ended his life too early in the opinion of his friends and family, but mercifully quickly, which was always his hope. He was 72.

Alan, one of five children born to Alan Mouton Thorndike and Mary Louise Van Dyke Thorndike, grew up in Bellport, NY, on the south side of Long Island. There he developed what became a life-long passion for sailing. Adventurous and not always one to follow the rules (he often acted as if "small craft advisories" applied only to those in dinghies), Alan sailed Long Island Sound, Puget Sound, and Barkley Sound; the Strait of Juan De Fuca, Haro Strait, and the Strait of Georgia; the waters surrounding the San Juan Islands; and the rivers and creeks of Chesapeake Bay. When sailing, he was often accompanied by friends, students, and family. Believing boats should be made from wood and willing to put in the work to care for them, Alan captained various catboats; a self-made 8' dinghy, *Lil' D*; a 19' William Garden-designed friendship Sloop, *Diane*; a 1962 vintage 41' Cheoy Lee ketch, *BlueWater*; and, finally, the *Peregrina*, a 30' sloop, also built by Cheoy Lee in 1962, which he restored and sailed in his retirement years.

Alan left Bellport to attend the Northfield Mount Hermon school in Massachusetts. College took him to Wesleyan University in Connecticut where in 1967 he earned a BA with an interdisciplinary focus on math, physics, and geology. At Wesleyan, Alan was a member of Alpha Delta Phi and gained Phi Beta Kappa membership. After college, he travelled to the Pacific Northwest where he earned his Ph.D. in geophysics from the University of Washington in 1978. Under the mentorship of his close friend Norbert Untersteiner, Alan was one of the early scientists studying the Arctic sea ice and climate change. At the age of 29, he was the Chief Scientist on the ice for the Arctic Ice Dynamics Joint Experiment (AIDJEX) and was one of the founding members of what is now the Polar Science Center at the University of Washington. Alan is credited with developing the notion of the thickness of the sea ice as a variable, a concept that is at the heart of most sea ice models used today. While on the ice, Alan was crucial to the scientific planning and field execution for AIDJEX. As it happened, leading the "field execution" included rescuing a colleague who slipped down a snow slope and directing the evacuation of the main Big Bear camp when the runway broke up in October 1975. While some deny climate

change and others fight to slow or reverse it, we're all indebted to Alan for his contributions to our understanding of it.

Alan's professional passion was teaching. He joined the faculty at the University of Puget Sound (UPS) in Tacoma, Washington, in 1983. He became the second University Professor of the Natural Sciences and was awarded emeritus status as a Professor of Physics upon his retirement in 2012. Alan checked all of the boxes as a member of the academy: publishing papers in peer reviewed journals, chairing his department, serving on faculty and board committees, and organizing academic programming such as the Max Plank Symposium, which he hosted at UPS in honor of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the quantum. But he was most proud of his contributions as a teacher, often enabled by his skilled craftsmanship of wood and metal. He loved to recreate famous physics experiments, such as the Zeeman effect, with students in his lab. He innovated with teaching both within his department (at one point attempting to teach electromagnetism "backwards") and across disciplines (including courses on the Origins of Life and climate modeling). He designed the multi-story Foucault pendulum that hangs in UPS's Harned Hall and built the Penrose tiling that lies beneath it. But his crowning achievement of the intersection of physics and craftsmanship was the model he built, based on the conceptual theories of his colleague, Jim Evans, of the Antikythera Mechanism — a 2,200 year old device, which went undiscovered for 1,800 years, that has been labeled the world's first computer and is believed to model the movement of celestial bodies. (See picture and look it up in your favorite search engine; it's worth the read.)

Alan's talents extended far beyond the sciences and the classroom. He ran cross-country and track, and he completed several marathons. He worked on the Appalachian Mountain Club trail crew in the White Mountains and enjoyed alpine climbing in the Pacific Northwest. In Washington State, he won 24-hour time trial bicycle races (once logging 391 miles, as apparently 65 laps around the 6-mile track didn't quite feel like enough). And he put more than 11,000 miles on his recumbent bike during his last two years of life in Maryland. Alan played the recorder and the piano. He marbled paper, practiced Japanese calligraphy, and enjoyed bridge. He built clocks and a mechanism to measure the tides in Oxford's Town Creek. He forged bronze, making tools, gears, sailing hardware, and gifts. He was a master woodworker who built beautiful furniture for his family, bowls and boxes for friends, and toys for his grandchildren.

Alan went by many names. As a boy, friends and family would call him “Nicky,” owing to his Christmas Eve birthday. As a teenager, “Nicky” gave way to “Al” and eventually to “Alan.” He was “Angel” to his wife of 42 years, Louise; “Dad” to his children — daughters, Stewart and Ashley, and son, John; and “Deeda” to his grandkids, who absolutely adored him. Whatever we may call him, we miss him deeply.

At Alan’s request, there will be no services. His family looks forward to hosting in Alan’s honor a musical concert and celebration for family members and the Oxford community this Spring. In lieu of flowers, those interested in charitable contributions are urged to consider making monetary donations to the American Parkinson’s Disease Association or simply doing something kind for someone in need, as he so often did.

[end]

*Alan Stewart Thorndike (1945 – 2018)*

