

## REMEMBERING AL CONE

*By Martin Gerson, with input from Elaine Cone and Robin MacQueen*

### Albert Aloysius Cone

**November 24, 1935 - October 10, 2021**

*Physicist, musician, composer, Langara teacher, beloved father of four children: Conrad (Therese), Carolyn, Corbin, Kristi (Patrick), beloved "Baba" of two grandsons Marcus and Lucas and beloved husband of Elaine.*

*Married in Cambridge Massachusetts October 2 1965, Elaine brought Al home to Vancouver where he fell in love with the mountains.*

*He was a former member of the Vancouver Philharmonic Orchestra and the West Coast Symphony Orchestra, and a former member of the North Shore Hikers group where he spent weekends climbing mountains and dabbling in Rock Climbing, often taking his son Corbin with him ...*



*Al and Elaine with their kids, kids-in-law, and grandkids (2015)*



*Al and Elaine (2019)*

So began the notice, written by Al's wife, Elaine, that was sent to the LCAR mailing list a year ago. Since then, some of us have had the time to remember our particular relationships with Al, what a remarkable contribution he made to our lives and to the Langara community, and what a wonderfully multi-faceted person he was. Those who saw him walking the halls of Langara but didn't know him much beyond that might be forgiven for thinking he was just a quiet, slow-walking man of few words, with his head probably so wrapped up in his Physics he had little time for much else. Not so!

***Al the Jesuit:*** Born in Philadelphia, Al entered a Jesuit seminary after high school and seemed headed for the priesthood. In the end, the Jesuits couldn't offer him the answers he was looking for to the big questions of life, so he left before ordination. But along the way, he got a very strong undergraduate education in Classical Studies as well as Physics and Math, in the seminary and at

Fordham, New York City's Jesuit University. This included Philosophy and a deep knowledge of Latin and Greek, to which he added enough German, French and Russian to be able to read scholarly papers in those languages when he was later working on his Ph.D. in Physics at Harvard. And it left him well equipped to substitute, on a couple of occasions, for Rev. Jim Roberts (Langara's first instructor of Religious Studies and Latin, who retired in the mid-1990s).

***Al the department chair:*** Al joined the faculty at the college in 1966, when it was still at the old King Edward Campus. Though originally hired to teach Math, he moved to the Science Department to teach Physics after a term or two. He soon became chair of the Science Department and remained chair of his department as the other sciences gradually split off, eventually serving at least three extended stints as Physics Department Chair.

Robin MacQueen remembers: *I first met Al when I joined the Physics Department in 1992, and we had many interactions until he retired about a decade later. For a good part of this time we had neighbouring offices, and we used to chat frequently. Al could appear gruff, but I found him to be a kind and generous man with a wry sense of humour.*

*Al wrote my first classroom evaluation. In my subsequent years of reading hundreds of classroom visit reports, I never saw anything quite like it. Normally he was a man of few words, but this report was more than five pages long, and included hand-drawn diagrams as well as the names of students who responded in class. Here's one sentence: 'There was a genial air of cogitational chaos as the example got straightened out between the efforts of the [student] presenter and advice from the rest.'*

*Al knew when to bend the rules. Once I watched while, as department chair, he advised a student and granted a course override. After the student left, I asked why Al had not followed the posted procedure and asked for written proof of the course prerequisite. Al replied, 'I only stand on formality when I don't trust the person.'*

*In those days, before the web and even before email, we had to hand-write final grades onto an official copy of the grade sheet, then deliver it to a cardboard box labelled "Val's box for grades" just inside the Registrar's Office. At the end of one Spring term, I wanted to take a trip down the Pacific coast with my family, leaving just after my last exam. I asked Al, and he offered to fill in my grade sheet and drop it in Val's box if I phoned in the grades.*

*I will always appreciate the respect and kindness Al showed me as a young instructor.*

***Al the musician:*** And what a talented and enormously diverse musician he was! In addition to playing bassoon, oboe, other wind instruments and double bass at different periods with the two orchestras he played in, he was also a regular participant in the Langara Gala. One year he played bassoon in a wind chamber group he had pulled together for the Gala. In other years, he performed his own composition on the piano and sang the bass part in a madrigal quartet. Once he sang the "Catalogue Aria" from Mozart's Don Giovanni, in Italian, while accompanying himself on an electric keyboard. For a number of years, Al was seconded to UBC to teach a course on the Physics of Music.



*LFA President 1976-77*

***Al the senator:*** When I became involved with the LFA in the very early '80s, I started hearing about “the Senate,” the moniker that was embraced by the group of past-(and current)-presidents of the LFA. Senate meetings consisted of getting together a couple of times a year, usually at the home of one of the senators, on a Friday for lunch and an afternoon of heavy drinking and light conversation. Al put his classical education to good use as the Senate’s de facto Director of Ceremonies. When I became LFA president and was initiated into the Senate, Al presented me with a laurel wreath and a scroll, entirely in Latin, composed in the style of a Roman senatorial declaration, which began something like “Senatus Populusque Langarenses ...”.

***Al the mountaineer:*** An avid hiker, Al participated in and often led hikes up most of the accessible local mountains. One thing that he and I shared was a never-fulfilled desire to reach the

summit of Sky Pilot Mountain, the highest in the string of coastal peaks running up the east side of Howe Sound between Horseshoe Bay and Squamish. Sky Pilot is a shy thing, tucked out of sight, hiding well back behind the ridge over which Shannon Falls tumbles. From the Sea to Sky highway, it can only be seen by driving about 18 km north of Squamish, to the Tantalus Lookout, and then looking back, towards the south. Sky Pilot is typically climbed over two days, hiking up to make a base camp on the first day, camping overnight on a ridge or shoulder below the peak, and then climbing the peak the next morning before going back to pack up the base camp and hike down the mountain. I was on two failed attempts with Al - not the first attempt for either of us. Both times, we woke up at our base camp in thick cloud and decided that our lives were too valuable to be risked on the rock face under those conditions – i.e., we chickened out. Al’s obsession with Sky Pilot was greater than mine: some years later, during a discussion with Elaine on end-of-life issues, he expressed a desire for his ashes to be spread “beyond Sky Pilot.” After he died, Elaine hired a helicopter and, with their adult kids, finally took Al to Sky Pilot.



*Sky Pilot group of peaks looking south from the Tantalus Lookout. Mt. Habrick (left), Ledge Mtn. (centre) and Sky Pilot Mtn. (right), highest of the three.*