

An Obituary For My Father

Homer Eugene Conzett was born on Oct. 16, 1920 in Dubuque, IA to Swiss immigrants, Andrew and Christina (Accola) Conzett. He was one of 10 children, eight who survived to adulthood: Sylvia, Evelyn, Alvin, Alvina, Lucille, Milton, Elmer, Homer, Robert and Jeanne. Sylvia and Alvin succumbed to the Spanish Flu in 1912.

He attended the University of Dubuque and graduated Magna Cum Laude in 1942 with a major in Physics and a minor in Math. He was a tremendous athlete, participated in numerous extracurricular activities and seemed to win every scholastic award the school could offer. In his Senior Year, he was Student Council President, "13" Club (fraternity) President, was included in the 1941-42 edition of *Who's Who Among Students in American Universities and Colleges*, and was Iowa Conference tennis singles and doubles champion. Plus he wrestled, trained as a civilian pilot and was a D-Club (sports varsity) member.

"Stretch" joined the Navy after World War II broke out, serving as a Degaussing Physicist from 1942-44. Stationed in Key West, FL, he played a vital role in the battle of the Atlantic. Originally used in WWII to reduce ships' magnetic signatures, degaussing is still used on naval warships to evade enemy detection. It is also used by libraries to prevent book theft.

In 1946, he moved to California to pursue a graduate degree at UC Berkeley (Go Bears!). He had been promised by the Navy that he would not be called back to active duty while in school, but they again needed his degaussing expertise during the Korean War to neutralize the magnetic field of Allied naval vessels used for minesweeping operations. He graduated in 1956 with a PhD in Nuclear Physics (his dissertation was "Inelastic Scattering of 12-Mev Protons on Lithium, Carbon, Magnesium, and Silicon"). He was then awarded a Fulbright Scholarship and was a visiting lecturer at the University of Tokyo for a year in 1957-58.

He returned to Berkeley and met his future wife, Nancy (Tapscott), on the tennis courts. They married in 1960 at her mother's home, the Spring Valley Schoolhouse (from 1894) in St Helena. They settled in Kensington, CA and Andrew Churchill was born in 1961, Rebecca Ann in 1963.

My father spent his entire career at Lawrence Berkeley (National) Laboratory as a Research Physicist at the 88" cyclotron, where he specialized in polarization. He wrote more than 100 research papers in his almost 40 years at the lab and presented his work at physics conferences and symposiums all over the world. He provided the definition of "polarization" for the Dictionary of Physics and was *likely* nominated with a colleague for a Nobel Prize for their work on time reversal invariance. The names of the nominees cannot be revealed until 50 years later, so I'm still waiting to verify this.

Twenty years ago today, on February 24, 2005, Homer Conzett killed himself; I was the one to find him. On that day, a piece of me also died and I have not been able to write an obituary for him. Until today.

Yes, my father was a brilliant man. But more importantly, he was the person who taught me basic car, electrical, plumbing and mechanical repair because it didn't matter that I was a girl, only that I was interested. He helped me with my homework, taught me to ski and to drive a stick-shift, and played tennis with me all over Europe on grass, clay, carpet and hard courts. I finally won my first set against him in 1986 (he was 65 and I was 23) in Grenoble, France at the same house our family had lived during a sabbatical year in 1966-67.

He rarely had a bad word to say about anyone and was a true gentleman who showed me how to treat others. He loved puns and had a dry, witty sense of humor. He loved to travel, to meet and understand different

people, instilling in me a broad, liberal worldview. He helped me buy my first house by advancing me money against my future inheritance while keeping meticulous records of all such monetary transactions!

My father was thoughtful and caring, but also depressed and emotionally closed. His marriage was a disaster but he bought my mother a separate home and continued to maintain the union. It was a practical decision, a way to avoid selling the family home and, expecting to die first as he was 12-½ years her elder, assuring that my mother would receive his pensions and medical insurance upon his death.

An Obituary For A Piece of Me

On February 24, 2005 I arrived at my childhood home, ostensibly to pick up dad, who would be staying with my wife and me before I took him to a doctor's appointment the following day. It was dark, the porch light was not on, the front door was locked. I knew something was wrong, but could not bring myself to believe what my brain was trying to tell me. I made my way along the side of the house and entered through the back door into the lighted dining room. I didn't notice all the paperwork neatly laid out on the table with the suicide note. I turned my gaze instead to the dark living room and noticed him laying at the bottom of the stairs, in and out of shadow. I knew what was coming, but again, my brain was absolutely unable to accept it. I ran into the living room - certainly already screaming hysterically - and switched on a light. I didn't notice the glass of alcohol or the pills. I just saw my father with the rope around his neck, his lifeless body spread across the bottom stairs and the floor. He was smart. He planned it all out. He took something to put himself to sleep and then let gravity do all the work. I understand WHY he did it; his body was failing and he feared a nursing home; forever practical, his death assured more money for my mom, my brother and me.

Hysteria is weird. I thought I was fine, but I apparently made no sense to Mary when I called her, nor to the police who were trying to figure out my location. I was in a daze for weeks, my 42nd birthday passing by...but remembering that my dad had been 42 when I was born. While on a long-planned Caribbean cruise in April, I was still very emotionally raw and decided that I needed to write him a note. I then wadded it up and heaved it over the side into the ocean. When we got home, there was word that his ashes had been spread at sea that very same day.

Something in me died that evening. A piece of my heart turned to stone and it still remains rock solid. Therapy helped a lot, but I developed PTSD and was unable to sleep without seeing him dead. I forgot what he sounded like and despaired even more. I realize that in the depths of his depression, he did not consider how his actions would affect my brother and me; I don't blame him, but wish he hadn't set me up with a ruse. It certainly would have been no better if my brother had found him instead of me.

Twenty years later, I can view my father as a tragic figure - someone I wish I could have helped in some way - but also as a heroic figure for all of his brilliant accomplishments. He definitely figured greatly in the person I became; I thank him everyday for that (and for moving to California). Happily, the negatives have been tempered by time and I can think fondly of my super-brilliant, funny, caring and (somewhat) generous dad. He was a proud miser, after all!

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<https://www.researchgate.net/scientific-contributions/H-E-Conzett-72618911>