



## Richard Ellwood Leinaweaver

July 20, 1930 - May 4, 2024

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Richard Leinaweaver was one of those unforgettable, larger-than-life personalities. He cherished many things through the course of his more than ninety years – family and friends, music, theater, tennis - and not least the image of himself he created, of an elegant gentleman smoking his cigar and drinking liqueur while talking philosophy; exploring the world around him through extensive travel (including flying his own plane); staying a forever learner with deep education and broad interests.

Richard was born to Mabel Kauffman, in Belleville, Pennsylvania, in July of 1930. In 1932, Emma Theresa Judith Leinaweaver and Walter Ellwood Leinaweaver of Lancaster, Pennsylvania adopted Richard. Richard was a boy scout and an altar boy. He enjoyed singing lessons and one of his early heroes was Frank Sinatra. He played football at Lancaster Catholic High School, and he maintained a lifelong determination to stay active.

In 1950, he enlisted in the Air Force and served at Lowry, Lackland, and

Laughlin Air Force Bases. He loved, in later years, to claim that the uniform matched his eyes – but he definitely wanted to learn to fly! A favorite story he often told was after an honorable discharge from the Air Force in 1953, he flipped a coin to decide whether to hitchhike west to San Francisco or north to Denver – Denver won. In Colorado, he worked in the Boulderado Hotel, tried construction and real estate, and was active in community theater.

In 1955, Richard moved to New York City to pursue his developing dream of acting. He attended the American Academy of Dramatic Arts while working at the Brass Rail restaurant. After a few roles and a couple of hungry years in New York, Richard returned to the mountains to attend the University of Colorado in Boulder, to earn a bachelors in theater. At CU, Richard fell in love with Mary Eleanor (Ellie) Harper, a fellow theater student, who became his wife in 1960. He taught at Golden High School in Colorado and the Colegio Americano de Guayaquil in Ecuador, as he completed a Masters degree at CU with his thesis, “Ben Jonson’s Theories of Comedy.”

In 1964 Richard and Ellie moved to Lansing, Michigan to begin his PhD in Theater at Michigan State. Richard began directing plays, such as “Oedipus Rex” and “Wonderful Town”. He received his doctorate in 1967, with his dissertation, “The Indigenous Drama of Meso-America”.

Richard worked for most of his career as a professor at Central Washington State College (now University) in Ellensburg, Washington. With Fulbright support, he spent a year teaching in Colombia in 1968. He and Ellie flew their own plane, Piper Tri-Pacer N8722D, from central Washington state to Bogota, Colombia. It didn’t even have a working radio at the time!

While Richard and Ellie were living in Bogota, they adopted Jeffrey James Leinaweaver, Richard's first child. Another story Richard loved to tell was about flying the Tripacer back to the U.S., baby Jeff in the back seat, when engine oil started leaking and spraying onto the windscreen! Richard made a blind emergency landing into a Brahma bull pasture in Isthmus of Tehuantepec, and, with the help of a local motorcycle mechanic, was able to get airborne three days later. Richard and Ellie's marriage ended in the early 1970s, and Ellie and Jeff moved from Washington to Colorado.

Back in Ellensburg, Richard made his presence known in the theater department at CWSC (CWU). He opened a new "Tower" theater in the round at Barge Hall, directing the opening show in the space, "Slow Dance on the Killing Ground.". He established the college's Mexico Program in Guadalajara. He directed many plays, musicals, and operas at Central, including "Galileo", "La Boheme", and "Man of La Mancha". In 1980, Richard started the Laughing Horse Summer Theater repertory program, first at Lake Chelan and then in Ellensburg, where it lasted through the 1990s.

In 1969, on the set of "Galileo", Richard met Connie Bennett, who played the role of Galileo's daughter, Virginia. They continued to keep in touch after she graduated, and once Richard convinced Connie that she was the love of his life, married in 1975 on the Winter Solstice - the longest night of the year!

Richard and Connie, a librarian, settled together in Ellensburg where their two daughters, Jessa and Alexa, grew up. Richard won another Fulbright Lectureship in 1987, this time to teach at the Universidad de Costa Rica in San Jose, where he, Connie, and the girls lived for a year.

After making enormous contributions to the CWU theater department and serving several stints as department chair, Richard took early retirement in 1992, and the family moved to Grand Junction, Colorado, for Connie's new librarian position.

Richard's family continued to grow in the twenty-first century as his three children married (two of them eloped, so Richard was extra thrilled to walk daughter Alexa down the aisle at her marriage to Kevin Butler!). He gained three grandchildren as well: Marisa, Leo, and Olivia. Richard joyfully welcomed all additions to his family with love.

A different kind of family expansion came in 1997, when genealogical research allowed discovery of and introduction to Richard's birth family. His genetic mother had passed away the year before, but he met his half siblings Sam Spurrier (wife Sherry) and Edna (Nancy) Spurrier, learning much about his earliest childhood.

Connie and Richard continued to live a full and exciting life after their children were out of the nest. They continued to travel the world – Jordan, China, Colombia, and Tanzania as a few examples - racking up a list of more than fifty countries. Richard loved to see how other peoples around the world lived their lives, and he learned how to say “beer” in several languages.

As Connie's professional career advanced, she and Richard moved to Oregon (first to Silverton, then Eugene). Richard, though officially retired, continued to

make an impact on the local theater scene and in 2009 started Eugene's ongoing "Northwest Ten" festival of 10 minute plays at Oregon Contemporary Theatre (then Lord Leebrick), in collaboration with Connie and their friend Paul Calandrino. He also explored a different aspect of theater (beyond the acting, directing, and producing he'd been doing all along) and began writing plays as well. He was a member of the Very Little Theatre, enjoyed singing in the Symphony & Opera choruses, and wrote theater reviews for the local newspaper. He played tennis at least three times a week at the Eugene YMCA throughout his seventies and eighties. Even long after giving up cigars he loved to linger with family and friends after a meal and discuss any number of topics ("shoes and ships and sealing-wax") in the Mediterranean tradition of the "sobremesa."

In 2016, Richard had a difficult year, receiving treatment for prostate cancer, skin cancer, breaking a rib in a car accident, getting a heart pacemaker, and receiving a diagnosis of Mild Cognitive Dementia (Alzheimer's type). However, he was never one to let problems stand in his way and he continued to travel, write, and generally enjoy life. He enjoyed being the visiting playwright at performances of his short plays in Ann Arbor and Bainbridge Island.

Eventually, Connie and Richard decided that a little more support would be nice as they age, so they moved to a senior community in Fort Collins, Colorado, near where Alexa and Kevin live. In March of 2020 - perfect timing! Their first several months in town during lockdown were challenging. As his Alzheimer's-type dementia progressed, Richard moved into the memory care portion of the facility in 2021, where he could receive top quality, professional care. The family is grateful to staff at MacKenzie Place (especially the Opal unit), LoveCare Home Care, and Bristol Hospice for the care and affection he received from them. Although his memory was failing, he still recalled the

most important things until the very end: the people he loved; his fierce independence; his joy in music and movement; and lots of Shakespeare quotes and bad puns.

Richard was preceded in death by all his parents. He is survived by his wife, Connie Bennett; his three children, Jeffrey James, Jessaca, and Alexandra; and his grandchildren Marisa, Leo, and Olivia.

A private service will be held. In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to Laughing Horse Arts in Ellensburg (<https://www.laughinghorsearts.org/>), the Very Little Theatre in Eugene (<https://thevlt.com/>), or Compassion and Choices (<https://www.compassionandchoices.org/>).

# Tribute Wall

JE

“ 1 file added to the tribute wall



jessa - May 22, 2024 at 02:57 PM

RB

“ I didnt know him for very long but his big personality made an impact on me, one of my favorite memories will be holding that skull and reciting Shakespeare while he corrected me

Randall Blewer - May 16, 2024 at 07:12 PM

JE

“ 1 file added to the album Photos of Richard



Jessaca - May 08, 2024 at 03:19 PM

CO

“ 1 file added to the tribute wall



Connie - May 07, 2024 at 04:03 PM

JD

“ *Jill Davis lit a candle in memory of Richard Ellwood Leinaweaver*



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**Jill Davis** - May 07, 2024 at 02:24 PM

BF

“ *Richard was my cousin. He was a kind and generous person. I'm sorry to learn of his passing, and my condolences to the family.*  
*Barbara Leinaweaver Fordney*

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**Barbara Fordney** - May 07, 2024 at 09:13 AM

JE

*Thank you so much Barbara. I found a picture of you and Dad - posting it here. ~Jessaca*

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**Jessaca** - May 08, 2024 at 03:14 PM

BT

“ *Richard was an inspiration to we young actors learning to tread the boards at college, with diction to aspire to. Knowledge, a guiding hand, and a powerful voice, lead us through many classes and productions with motivation and feeling. Thank you Richard for your time and love, and love of the theater.*

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**Brian Thompson** - May 06, 2024 at 01:56 PM

JL

“ 1 file added to the album Photos of Richard



Jessaca Leinaweaver - May 06, 2024 at 10:17 AM

DA

“ Richard may not have been much of a cook, but he did what he did extremely well. No visit between our families was complete without Richard's spaghetti with garlic bread — always an anticipated dinner. He took joy in sharing with us.

Diana Archangeli - May 06, 2024 at 09:13 AM

AL

I plan to make Leinaweaver spaghetti next week! 🍝❤️

Alexa Leinaweaver - May 06, 2024 at 10:52 AM

AL

“ Richard, dressed as the character Iago from Shakespeare's "Othello", on the cover of the 1962 Colorado Shakespeare Festival program.



Alexa Leinaweaver - May 05, 2024 at 10:45 PM

AL

“ *Some childhood photos of Richard.*



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**Alexa Leinaweaver** - May 05, 2024 at 07:41 PM