



Jeffrey Morse Leonard

January 11, 1951 - March 10, 2025

Jeff Leonard, a longtime resident of Corvallis and a beloved husband, father, brother, and friend, died on March 10, 2025, surrounded by family, at the home he shared with his wife, Sandy Fichtner. He was 74 and had battled cancer for eight years.

Jeff worked for three decades as a plant scientist at Oregon State University, directing a wheat research lab for much of that time. A life-long adventurer and outdoorsman and intensely curious by nature, he had many interests and passions, including family and friends, making things (he was a devoted woodworker and home improver), gardening (he landscaped their beautiful yard), sailing, skiing, biking (both bicycle and motorcycle), hiking, backpacking, and camping.

He enjoyed few things more than an evening sitting around his backyard fire pit with family and friends, conversing on a wide range of topics, sharing stories, and laughing over a beer.

Jeff was born in January 1951 in Newton, Massachusetts, to Allen and Alice Leonard, the second of four boys. He grew up in Wayland, a small town not far from Boston, attending both Claypit and Loker elementary schools and then Wayland Middle School.

His mother was well-read and got Jeff interested in reading at an early age. He had fond memories of riding his bike to the local library and poring over books for hours. His parents owned a set of World Book Encyclopedias, and he would often pull down a volume at random and read the entries on whatever page it fell open to.

Jeff's father was a florist who owned a flower shop in nearby Wellesley, where, as boys, Jeff and his brothers were frequently recruited to help out. In early adolescence, he held an afterschool and summer job at a local nursery, working in a greenhouse. He developed a love of plants that would last his entire life and shape his career path. As a researcher at OSU, he would spend much of his time in greenhouses.

The family home in Wayland backed up to acres of woodlands with a brook and pond. He and his brothers and friends would spend many summer days playing in these woods, building treehouses, fishing, and the like. In the winter they would climb the hills and ski or sled down.

Jeff attended Wayland High school for his freshman and sophomore years. But the expectations and demands of his parents became oppressive, and in the summer following his sophomore year, he ran away from home, spending a couple weeks in Montreal.

When he eventually returned home, he and his parents decided that boarding school might be best. They settled on Augusta Military Academy, in Fort Defiance, Virginia. Jeff spent his final two years of high school there, graduating second in his class in 1969. Still, he did not take to the uniforms, rules, and regimentation. "It was not a positive experience," he recalled.

Upon graduation, he enrolled at Boston University, riding a motorcycle from his parents' home to school every day. The campus environment, with the

liberal curriculum, long-haired professors, and pot-smoking students, was a radical departure from military school. “My brain got turned around,” he said. “I got educated to life’s possibilities.”

After two years, Jeff decided he’d had enough of college. He sold the motorcycle, went out to Highway 20, which ran right by his house, and stuck out his thumb. After a series of rides, he hooked up in Chicago with “a bunch of hippies” heading West in an old done-up school bus. When he hit the Pacific Ocean, Jeff headed north.

He ended up in Jasper, British Columbia, camping with a group of young people down by the river. It was 1970. “That was the turning point,” he remembered.

Although never drafted into the military—he drew a high lottery number—Jeff decided to emigrate to Canada, an easy process back then, in part so that he could legally work there and in part as a personal statement against the war in Viet Nam.

He spent the better part of the next decade—what he later referred to as his “vagabond years”—ping ponging between Canada (primarily British Columbia) and Mexico and Central America, usually summering up north and wintering down south.

During his Canadian summers, he worked a wide range of jobs to pay for his winter adventures. He scrubbed hides in a tannery, drove railroad spikes up in the Yukon, loaded ore cars in a coal mine near Canmore, cleared trails in Vancouver’s Stanley Park, picked apples, and planted trees for the Canadian forest service.

Eventually, he left Canada, drawn to the Big Island in Hawaii, where he lived with friends in a shack on a macadamia nut farm, working for rent and eating off the land, a self-described “fruit fly, waiting for the mangoes and guavas to drop.”

In the early summer of 1978, Jeff flew to the mainland with a friend who had a truck waiting in L.A., and together they drove cross country to Durango, Colorado, which would be home off and on for the next decade.

His first night in Durango, he went to a bar called Farquarts to hear some music, and there he met a group of guys who offered him a job planting trees. One night in town and he already had a job and a group of friends. Several nights later, he went back and met a lovely red-head who was down from Montana visiting friends. They danced. Her name was Sandy, and he would spend the rest of his life with her. Farquarts, he later said, “was my lucky bar.”

Over the next two summers, Jeff commuted to New Mexico and Utah to work on a survey crew mapping gas lines. During the winter, he was a ski bum at Purgatory, a mountain outside of Durango.

By fall though, Sandy convinced Jeff to take a chance on life in Vermont. Jeff acquiesced, but after one icy winter washing dishes and skiing in Vermont’s Mad River Valley, the two headed back across the country, landing in Santa Barbara, California. Jeff took a job with a surveying company and attended math and drafting classes at a local community college to hone his surveying skills. While the stint in Santa Barbara was short, Jeff fell in love with the place and climate and often fantasized about returning one day to live.

The couple moved back to Durango in the late spring of 1982. But before settling, Jeff took Sandy to British Columbia for a summer of sea kayaking and camping, first along the Sunshine Coast, on the southwest mainland, and then

around the Broken Islands, on the western edge of Vancouver Island.

Back in Durango, Jeff once again worked as a surveyor during the summers and took drafting jobs in the winter. He also went back to school and completed a Bachelor's Degree in general science at Fort Lewis College, a state university located in Durango.

At Fort Lewis, Jeff met a professor who sparked his interest in genetics. Shortly after graduation, with the encouragement of the professor, he landed a three-month federal fellowship at the Brookhaven National Laboratory on Long Island, New York. There he worked with a plant researcher who was sequencing a gene. It was his first exposure to modern plant genetics.

While at Brookhaven, Jeff applied for and got a graduate fellowship to work toward a PhD at Oregon State University. So in the summer of 1991, he and Sandy set off for Corvallis. Looking back years later, Jeff said the only regret he had about the move was Oregon's winter rain. "We missed the sun for the first 10 or 15 years," he said.

As a grad student, he landed in the lab of a plant breeder who was performing cutting-edge research in the molecular genetics of plants. Specifically, they were experimenting on species called *Arabidopsis*, a fast-growing plant—it could go from seeded to seed in a matter of weeks—which was amenable to modern molecular manipulation.

The scientists could add or subtract genes to or from the plant and see the results in a matter of weeks. The research, Jeff said, was "exciting stuff" and resulted in many good scientific papers. "That was the most fun time of my whole science career," he said.

He was awarded a PhD through the department of botany and plant pathology

in the winter of 1996, at the age of 45, and transitioned to a post-doc at OSU in environmental and molecular biology, researching DNA repair.

Meanwhile, he and Sandy had married in the garden of their Corvallis home in May of 1993. Their son Ian was born later that year. For previous decades, Jeff had been guided by an innate quest for adventure, but when he and Sandy moved to Corvallis and Ian arrived, that all took a turn. He realized that he valued family and the stable lifestyle it presented more than anything else. “I didn’t see it coming,” he said. “My perspective totally changed about what was important in my life.”

That didn’t mean the adventures were over. As soon as Ian was old enough, he and Sandy started introducing Ian to all the activities that they loved: skiing, camping, hiking, biking, sailing, traveling, among others. Over the years, Jeff became an avid student and fan of every sport and academic interest his son gravitated toward. He wanted to be part of Ian’s life in a way that his father had not been part of his. “I wanted to give him as many options as possible,” he said. “And I wanted him to think for himself.”

Jeff had learned to sail on the Charles River when he was a boy. And during Ian’s growing-up years, he bought a sailboat that was moored at Fern Ridge Reservoir outside of Eugene. He also signed up for charter groups, sailing in the Salish Sea, the Caribbean, and the San Juan and Gulf islands.

In 2003, Jeff signed on for a second post-doc (officially becoming what is known in academe as a “permadoc”) in a lab that focused on the molecular improvement of wheat. The work matched his long-term interests and ambition, and he quickly became enamored of the properties, history, and utility of this particular plant. “I learned to really love wheat,” he said.

When the head of the lab left OSU for another job, Jeff was named director. And in 2012, the university granted him a research professorship in crop and soil science, a title he held until he retired in 2016.

When Jeff was diagnosed with a sarcoma on his knee in 2017, he fought the idea of amputation. But after many surgeries and hospitalizations, he relented and found that a psychic weight lifted. He began to see that the cancer was an opportunity to look at, and approach, life differently. From that point on, he seemed to relish every day.

One of Jeff's greatest pleasures, dating back to his childhood, was "making things." His dad had a shop, and Jeff taught himself to use the various woodworking tools. At 14, he built a boat—dubbed "the leaky tiki" after Thor Heyerdahl's famous raft, Kon-Tiki—that he would fish from in a pond near his house. Much later, in Durango, he built a 12-foot rowboat, the Acorn, that would later accompany him to Oregon.

After his diagnosis, Jeff moved his make-shift shop from his garage to a more spacious outbuilding on his property and spent endless hours out there, stereo blasting, organizing his many tools, tackling home improvement projects, and building lovely pieces of furniture. Working in his shop made him happy.

Jeff also continued to work in his beautiful garden, which often involved pruning and moving plants. These tasks proved challenging with only one leg, but he was not deterred.

An avid reader, Jeff usually had a book going, often something about the oceans or seafaring. And he relished researching unfamiliar topics, places, and people both in and beyond his immediate world.

During these later years, Sandy and Jeff frequently hit the road in their camper

van. (He loved the high dessert.) And he took vicarious, arm-chair pleasure from his friends' and family's many activities and adventures out in the world.

And always, he loved socializing over coffee or beers with his many friends.

In the spring of 2024, it appeared that the end was near. A surgeon at OHSU offered the option of a radical and risky surgery that had the potential to extend his life long enough to attend Ian's July wedding to his fiancé, Maria Bowe, whom Jeff adored.

After days of back and forth, he opted to undergo the eight-hour procedure, which proved to be a complete success. He was able to travel to Maryland for Ian and Maria's church wedding and also attended a second celebration up near Hood River a few weeks later. And he got one last beautiful Oregon summer. He was so grateful for those additional summer months, and he told friends that it was, amazingly, the best he'd felt in years.

Jeff never had a bad word to say about anyone. He was an adoring husband and father and a kind, generous, loyal friend. Everyone in his orbit felt fortunate to know him. He will be missed.

With love in his heart, Jeff left behind his wife, Sandy Fichtner of Corvallis; his son, Ian Leonard and daughter-in-law, Maria Bowe-Leonard of Portland, Oregon; a brother Allen Leonard and sister-in-law Lisa Korklan of Sudbury, Massachusetts; and a brother Craig Leonard and sister-in-law Debbie Leonard of Virginia Beach, Virginia; and sister-in-law Linda Avery; and many beloved nephews and nieces. In addition, he left behind a world of family who are his friends and friends who are his family. He is predeceased by brother Duncan Leonard of Hartford, Connecticut.

No public service is planned. In lieu of gifts, Jeff's family hopes you will find

your own way to carry forward his kind and generous spirit.

At Jeff's request, he always wanted the last line of his obituary to read: And he loved potatoes.

Tribute Wall

M(

“ My sincerest condolences to Sandy and all of Jeff's family, it is with great sadness that I have learned of this fate. I have been thinking of Jeff lately, how I should write a letter, and so many things have got in the way, and I just happened to come across this obit, on the Internet, of this passing, and I am saddened with all my heart. My last letter from Jeff was in December 2023, it was a letter of his wife Sandy, his son, Ian, Ian's upcoming wedding, his travels, his pursuits, his happiness, his accomplishments, it was a letter of hope and some darkness. We were friends of another time, the 1970's, of youth, of vitality, of the Vietnam War, of higher learning, of protest, of travel to distant places, the Rocky Mountains, the backpacking in remote areas. Later Jeff and Sandy travelled to Kelowna, BC Canada in 1984, to visit me and my family, such a wonderful time, we went to a beautiful beach in the Okanagan Valley. Somehow we had kept in contact, over the decades, I have moved several times, he continued to live in Corvallis, Oregon, a reliable connection and an address that did not change. I am in awe of your accomplishments Jeff, you are disciplined, determined and highly responsible, you have travelled from Boston, Mass. to Corvallis, OR, you have achieved a degree, you are a scientist, and you have a son who looks just like you, congrat's. I am noticing several names on this page(s), Jon Schafer, Bob White, Rob Aldridge, it has been many years, and yes there were many beers in Jasper, AB. R.I.P. Jeff Leonard, you will be sorely missed.

Ms. Yvonne Mack (Hume-Smith) - July 19, 2025 at 09:17 AM

BW

“ So sad to hear of Jeff's passing. Jeff and I go way back to 1972. We met in Jasper Alberta and over the years shared housing, worked jobs, sailed and spent time on the big island of Hawaii. I met Sandy in Waitsfield Vermont and members of his family in Massachusetts. I even got to ride in the "Leaky Tiki 2. Then stopped in to visit Jeff and Sandy in Durango on my way west in 1985. Later they relocated in Oregon, and I settled in the Seattle area dropping in to visit them from time to time. Jeff had quite a storied life to say the least. I am proud to have known him and will miss him. He told me once that there two really useful things God gave mankind.....plywood and potatoes!.....Bob

Bob White - March 31, 2025 at 09:27 PM

GH

“ I met Jeff in the early 2000s when our science labs at OSU were across the hall. We did not hang out much during those first years as careers and families occupied a lot of our time. Once our children headed off to college we had more time and our mutual interests in building ‘stuff’, plants, fishing and camping drew us together.

My wide, stable, but slow We-no-nah Fishman canoe was the perfect boat to get Jeff out on the water once his titanium knee limited his stability. One day on a fishing trip from Corvallis to Albany we stopped at Browers Rock St Park for lunch and fishing. I hiked off through blackberries to explore and when I returned I saw various articles of soaking wet clothing, that I recognized as Jeff’s, strewn along the river bank. Jeff was further down the bank fishing, his loss of balance and toppling into the river did not faze him or put a dent in his pleasure in a beautiful day of canoeing and fishing.

Jeff’s curiosity and interest in other people, ideas, sailing, and just about anything, made conversations flow easily from topic to topic. I would often stop by to use his table saw, but really it was just an excuse to hang out with Jeff in his shop. I wanted to find out was going on in Jeff’s life, but he would rather spend that time asking me about what I and the rest of my family was doing. Jeff had so much going on in his life, always a new project or interest he was exploring; but it was hard to get Jeff to talk about himself. He took particular interest in my ‘Into the Wild’ child, as I am sure my son’s itinerant rock climber life style reminded him of his “vagabond” years. Even if I arrived at his shop feeling a little down from the cold rain and clouds, political news, or worries about family or friends, I always left feeling better about myself and the world. Jeff’s love of life was infectious. He is an irreplaceable friend.

George Hoffman - March 20, 2025 at 12:00 AM

BN

“ What a touching and profound memory -- and what a tribute to Jeff and to "our times." I'm was born in 1951, like Jeff. On the East Coast, like Jeff. Hitchhiked off to my future, like Jeff. Found it on the West Coast, like Jeff. Lusted after adventure and spent my share of time in foreign countries, like Jeff. Became a father in my mid-forties, like Jeff. I am not as easy to be around as Jeff, because in the several times I found myself in his presence -- coffee, beers, backyard barbecue, laughter -- he struck me as one of the most enviably at ease people I'd ever met. Even during these past few years. What a sweet man, what an honor to have crossed paths with him, what a loss. I would say, RIP, Jeff, but that might be redundant -- Jeff seemed to embody peace while he was here, living his excellent life. Thank you for capturing and sharing his story so eloquently.

Brad Newsham - March 15, 2025 at 03:41 PM