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## MEMORIES OF MARK CHAMBERLAIN: MY LIFE WITH THE ADVENTURER/PHOTOGRAPHER/ANTI-WARRIOR

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Mark Chamberlain with Liz Goldner at the OC Arts Awards in 2014. Photo courtesy Liz Goldner

I met Mark Chamberlain on March 30, 2003, 10 days after the Shock and Awe invasion of Iraq. I visited his gallery, BC Space in Laguna Beach, to gather information for a review I was writing on his exhibition “Pretty Lies: Dirty Truths.” I had never seen an art show with such a powerful anti-war message. And I had never met a man like Mark. He was gracious, insightful, intelligent and articulate, and he manifested these characteristics as he explained the exhibition to me, while often segueing to comments about life, art and politics. As I listened, I became aware of his inner strength, passion, sense of mission and, especially, powerful sense of adventure.

Mark passed away peacefully on April 23, 2018, in Irvine.

I often asked him about his experiences while stationed in Korea during the American War in Vietnam. He told me about meeting damaged soldiers who were sent there before returning home, about how deeply their war stories affected him. He explained that during his two years of mandatory service, he had the opportunity to learn how corrupt the processes and politics of war really were.

Yet with the spirit of Friedrich Nietzsche—who is credited with the quote “That which does not kill us, makes us stronger”—Mark explained in a letter to a friend, “I was fortunate just to survive two years of active duty during a very bizarre era. Fortuitously, I picked up a camera as a means of focusing my attention and observations while maintaining a certain objective detachment, but also providing a way to share my views with others. I came to embrace the power of the photograph to communicate ideas, not just to convey images of things or activities.”

I soon recognized that Mark’s military experience changed the trajectory of his life, influencing him to move to Southern California, become a photographic artist, open a gallery and ultimately mount many anti-war exhibitions.



Mark Chamberlain at the Laguna Art Museum. Photo courtesy Liz Goldner

I also understood that Mark’s efforts to save the world through art shows was only part of his mission. He had co-founded the Laguna Canyon Project in 1980, a photographic documentation of Laguna Canyon Road, and with art partner Jerry Burchfield, he was documenting changes in

the area over time. As he often said, “Local residents see the canyon as a greenbelt buffer, while others view it as virgin territory ripe for development. But we felt it imperative to call into question prevailing conceptions of progress. We used photography, video, sculpture, performance, installations and collaborative events to address these concerns.” In fact, that art project was a profound influence in saving Laguna Canyon.

Mark and I initially became friends, spending hours discussing politics and art; we later became lovers. I moved into his home in October 2010 and spent seven and a half years with him, absorbing his profound wisdom about life; his knowledge of world affairs, art and pop culture; and enjoying his wacky sense of humor. I also admired his natural elegance and grace.

Over the years, we shared many meals; watched historical programs on TV together; and reminisced about political, social and personal events. Mark often related to me his adventures while growing up near the Mississippi River in Dubuque, Iowa. As a child, he explored the area’s hills and bluffs and rode boats through its streams and channels. He talked about his father often sending him to their home’s unabridged dictionary to look up words, explaining that this ritual became the genesis of his ability as a wordsmith. Stimulated by his tales, I soon began sharing mine of my Jewish childhood in the New Jersey suburbs, just outside of Manhattan.

Mark and I attended many art events and exhibitions over the years and went on several memorable vacations. Our most significant adventure was a week spent on his houseboat on the shores of the Mississippi River, near Dubuque. During our time there, Mark took me all over the town he had grown up in, telling me about his endless adventures, riding his bike and horses, climbing trees, swimming and fishing, playing in his high-school band and on the school’s tennis team, and serving a stint as student council president. I found myself reliving his escapades with him. Like a time traveler, I was witnessing the development of an extraordinary individual who seemed to carry with him his intrinsic childhood enthusiasm, along with the belief that he could accomplish whatever he set out to do—including saving Laguna Canyon.

Mark and I worked on many projects together over the years and edited each other’s writing; he also often provided me with photos for my art-related articles. Our last project together was writing the book *The Laguna Canyon Project: Refining Artivism*, published last year by Laguna Wilderness Press. In words by Mark, myself and six other contributors, the book describes the development of the Laguna Canyon Project and relates how it helped save the canyon from suburban development. We worked on it for five years, often battling about words, phrases, descriptions and intent. But we finally completed the book just before Mark became ill with lung cancer in December 2017.

By that time, we had worked through our differences, and our mutual writing and editing had become glorious. We experienced a profound meeting of our minds, so much so that I sometimes felt as though our brains had melded together, as though Mark’s thoughts and words were flowing through me, and vice versa. It was the apex of our relationship.



Mark Chamberlain and Liz Goldner at Main Beach in Laguna. Photo courtesy Liz Goldner

Mark's final adventure was his battle to overcome cancer. When he received his diagnosis, I told him that I would always carry on his legacy, that I would do my best to convey to the world his amazing accomplishments.

A few days before Mark passed away, I visited him in the hospital and told him how much I appreciated and loved him, how much I had grown during our relationship. He called me his "Pygmalion," implying that through his inspiration, influence, encouragement and imparting of his wisdom, I had grown in my life, relationships and work. One year after Mark's passing, I continue to maintain the perfection in my heart, mind and soul that I experienced when he was alive.

I recently related my experience with Mark to an artist friend, who wrote to me, "It was very moving to see your affection for him and how our conversation and my work connected to your experience and life together. It is a gift when art can create connections with human emotions and interactions."

*Liz Goldner is an arts and culture journalist based in Laguna Beach. For more information about her projects, including the aforementioned Laguna Canyon Project, visit [www.lizgoldner.com](http://www.lizgoldner.com).*