

Joseph Couse Swayze

July 11, 2022



Rockport - Joseph Couse Swayze, a long-time teacher, traveler and lover of the outdoors who inspired a generation of students to seek the truth in words and imagery, died on Monday, July 11th of congestive heart failure related to amyloidosis, a rare heart disease. A resident of Rockport, Mass., he was 77.

A man of eclectic interests and infectious curiosity, Joe shared his wisdom through photography and journalism for 33 years at Noble and Greenough School in Dedham, Mass. He taught students how to see the

world more clearly, whether asking probing questions as student journalists or focusing lenses on people and nature for black-and-white photography, a particular passion of his.

In many cases, Joe's classroom had no walls. He led legendary trips for students that included a canoe trip down the Hudson River, as well as biking adventures from Vietnam to the coast of California. And he always had his camera in hand, capturing portraits of life and nature that often others couldn't see.

His influence on students' career choice was profound. The three top editors on the 1977-78 staff of The Nobleman all became professional journalists, two at The Wall Street Journal and one at The New York Times. Over the years, Swayze disciples ended up at The Boston Globe, The Washington Post, National Geographic and others.

Asked once to list favorite interests and experiences, Swayze offered these: Canoe-tripping in Ontario, Canada; reading the New York Times, (always in print); just being with students, absorbing their energy and humor; bicycling the Pacific Coast Highway; laughing with friends and family; writing letters and reading books, and making black-and-white photographs in a traditional darkroom. At the top of that list was sharing life with Joanna, his wife of 54 years, and their son Andrew and his family.

His students continue to live by the lessons Joe taught.

"It's so easy for a student newspaper to be a kind of mindless cheerleader for the school. It's a lot harder, but a lot more impactful and ultimately more important, for students to learn to question their community," said Sam Howe Verhovek, a former Nobleman managing editor who is now a contributing writer for National Geographic magazine. "Joe Swayze made Nobles a better school by teaching students to question everything around them."

"Great teachers shape lives. Joe Swayze completely changed my life," said Scott McCartney, editor-in-chief of the 1977-78 Nobleman who went on to a 40-year career at The Associated Press and Wall Street Journal. "His joy for the world around him and unquenchable thirst for knowledge were contagious and inspiring."

Joe Swayze was born in Middletown, N.Y., while his father, also named Joseph, was in the Pacific with the U.S. Navy. His birthplace was not far from the Hamburg Mountains in New Jersey, where his family owned a rustic cabin overlooking a mountaintop lake. Joe credits his summers there with his early love of being on the water.

A 1966 graduate of Williams College, Joe spent a year in Vietnam as a U.S. Army information officer, writing news stories, making photographs, and escorting journalists in the field. Joe said that a day he spent with Larry Burrows, a legendary British combat photographer, inspired him to make photography a part of his life.

After working for the Bennington Banner and the Berkshire Eagle, he shifted gears, became a teacher and shared these passions for newspapering and photography with hundreds of Nobles students including and especially editors of The Nobleman. Joe also taught the Young Photographers class for many summers at the Maine Photographic Workshops.

Joe and Joanna, also a teacher in the Nobles art department, retired in 2006. In their final 15 years at Nobles, he and Joanna traveled to a dozen or so countries, including Russia and Easter Island, almost always with students in tow.

Having said goodbye to school life, Joe and Joanna moved to Rockport. There, Joe quickly made new neighborhood friends, who, like his students were drawn to his outgoing personality, quirky ways and his willingness to share his life and interests.

He stayed connected to family and his many friends through "snail mail" letters and photographs, delivered in brown kraft envelopes, which became something of a trademark. His postcards made from his photographs were works of art. So were his letters, tapped out on his manual Smith-Corona typewriter on old-fashioned copy paper and often signed with the traditional journalistic close, -30-

He is survived by his wife, Joanna Clark Swayze, their son, Andrew and his wife Dr. Jean Andersson-Swayze of Charlotte, VT, and Accra, Ghana; their children, Caroline, Margo and Lincoln. Other survivors include his four siblings, Lynn Salyer of Sudbury, MA, Robert (Joan) of Los Angeles, CA, Richard (Kim) of Colfax, CA, and Anne (Robin) of Putney, VT.

A memorial service in Rockport is planned for later this year. For those inclined please make donations in Joe's name to Williams College Alumni Fund, The Rockport Public Library, or plant a tree. For online guestbook please visit www.greelyfuneralhome.com.