

**A Tribute to Leon Knopoff** *May 5, 2011*

by his son Michael Knopoff

Thanks to Dave Jackson and to Paul Davis, and especially to Mom, for organizing this. And thanks to all of you, for your support, it means so much to our family. The times have been hard, but we'll get through them together.

Papa was a great man – but he was also a great guy. I'd like to share a few words on what he was like, especially his passion for the mountains, and his dynamic personality.

People who met Papa in the last couple of years would sometimes be impressed by his kindness and gentleness. And, these were important qualities of his. But what stand out to me were his vitality and humor, which were so energetic during all his other years: his sparkly personality, his wit, and his characteristic laugh.

All through the years, whenever I'd be having dinner at my folks' house (maybe at a time when Katie and Rachel were away at school or in another city), Papa would inevitably make some joke that was so off-the-wall I would be in stitches. Mom would pretend to be exasperated, turn to me, and say, "stop encouraging him!" That was one of our classic routines.

Papa had a great sense of fun and adventure, and he loved sharing his enthusiasms. As I was growing up (and in later years, too) we'd have great backpacking trips including Katie, Rachel, or Mom, with cousins and extended family, and friends. . . . Many of us here have been hiking with Papa, and he introduced many to backpacking for the first time.

Papa's mother Ray was an avid hiker and loved the outdoors. While my grandfather Max would stay with little Leon, Ray would go off on excursions in the local mountains. Papa's mobility was limited as a child. But once he got his knee fixed at age 21, he was raring to go. He soon became an accomplished mountaineer, going on many expeditions around the world. And remarkably, he remembered every detail.

Papa could name practically every peak and creek in the Sierras, and he seemed to have a map in his mind that linked everywhere he'd hiked – which was just about everywhere. This made it so easy to plan a hiking trip with him. He was always full of creative ideas, and all you had to say was, "where do you think we should go this summer?"

Papa's ability to remember everything never waned. (It's funny, when you're little, you look to your parents and think they have all the answers. But in this case, he really did have all the answers.) Anyway, this feature also made for good storytelling.

In one episode as a young man, Papa was on a several weeks-long solo trip in the Sierras. Halfway through the trip, he sustained a broken rib, and his continued hiking over the next days didn't help matters. Then he came upon a group of even more unfortunate hikers, who had come into the back-country unprepared, were lost, and needed help. Papa led them all out of the wilderness. Back in Bishop, he went to a hospital and told them he'd broken his rib the week before. They said there was nothing they could do about it now. So with a few days still left on his trip, he drove to Yosemite and hiked some more – including climbing Half Dome.

This story was told with Papa's characteristic modesty, as a sequence of events that unfolded, so you weren't really even aware who was the hero till afterwards. But his passion for the mountains shone through, as well as his principles.

Papa not only knew all the facts, but he also had a keen sense of what was the right thing to do. . . . Taking care of people and being supportive came naturally to him, I think that's why he's a father figure to so many. He took such pleasure and pride in your accomplishments. And I don't just mean the general "you" but you.

I'm so fortunate to have him as my very own father.

One of the things that makes me feel so lucky, is the time that he would set aside, just for me. On our family travels, there were exciting adventures the two of us shared, like being on the English Channel in an out-of-control hovercraft. And ridiculous ones, like the two of us going to a Japanese bath. But there were also memorable times when nothing much was happening, such as when I was little, riding with him to one of my junior basketball games. We were feeling so full of anticipation, and I was just happy to be with Papa.

Many of these special times occurred when we were backpacking in the mountains. We both loved sleeping under the stars. We would set up a tent in case of weather, but not go inside if we could help it. One particular night, when the weather was very threatening, we decided to risk being outside. We kind of egged each other on, and I think each of us was really glad the other also wanted to stay in the open. That night, a gale-force wind passed inches over our sleeping bags, but safely above us. Papa loved being in nature and experiencing all of it.

That time was so exciting, I loved being there, and being with Papa. He was more than my best friend. He and Mom have been my foundation, whom I've relied on for guidance on the most important things. Papa was my reference point for how I see the world and fit into it. And, he still is.