



James Davis McGehee

April 18, 1938 - March 21, 2020

James Davis McGehee died peacefully at 6:46 pm on Saturday, March 21, 2020, listening to his favorite music on KUSC at his home of 50+ years at 426 Canyon Acres Drive, Laguna Beach, CA with family and caregivers in attendance. Jim was 81 years old, just about a month from his 82nd birthday. We believe he went to be with Ardelles.

Jim died after a long fight with bone cancer. He was always in good spirits and would famously say, "I'm fine! I'm getting stronger." We learned to listen to what was said between the lines to know what was going on, to help him, because he was always upbeat and cheerful – no matter what. Like Ardelles, Jim "did it my way."

James Davis McGehee was born on April 18, 1938 in Atlanta, Georgia to Leo Raymond and Rowena James McGehee. He lived in Georgia until he was 4 years old. His father was in the Air Force, so his family moved a lot, first to Texas, then Colorado.

During WWII his father and older brother, Donald, went off to the war and he and his mother went to live with her sister, Cleo, on Rodeo drive in Hollywood, CA. Jim was 5. Jim hunted rabbits on the land where LAX is now and even remembered losing a baseball in the La Brea tar pits.

Later, the family moved to Fallbrook, CA where Jim enjoyed roaming through the hills on his own or on horseback. He liked to tell about the time he killed a rattlesnake by throwing handfuls of gravel, really hard, at it. His mother died when he was 12 and his father married a Romanian princess who escaped to America during the war. Princess Alexandra Ghika brought Jim 3 new sisters and an adopted brother (her cousin, Henry, who helped the family escape.)

Jim followed the family tradition of going to military school. He really enjoyed charging the hill under fire at Camp Pendleton and asked the marines there if they got paid to do that. They answered in the affirmative. He signed up with the Marines as soon as he was allowed.

He was part of operation Plumbbob, the controversial nuclear testing, in 1957. The military were lined up and nuclear bombs were detonated near them so that the military could tell how the average foot soldier would stand up in a nuclear battlefield. He said that he could see the bones in his hands as they were held over his closed eyes during the tests.

He had many other adventures during his time in the military and even changed services

to have the opportunity to serve in different countries, including a stint in the Rhein valley in Germany.

Jim's military awards included:

- Bronze Oak Leaves – 3, a Meritorious Medal
- Bronze Oak Leaves – 2, an Army Commendation Medal
- Bronze Oak Leaves – 1 Army Achievement Medal
- Army Good Conduct Medal
- Marine Corps Good Conduct Medal
- Bronze Oak Leaves – 2, USAR Achievement Medal
- 1 Bronze Star, National Defense Service Medal
- Armed Forces Reserve Medal
- Army NCO Professional
- Development Ribbon
- Army Overseas Service Ribbon

Jim was a sharpshooter for the army reserves and traveled to participate in matches throughout the country during his reserve career. We have a letter congratulating his team coming in 3rd place in at least one of these nationwide events.

When Princess Ghika died in 1963, Jim's father asked Jim to come home, which he did, otherwise he would have been a career military man. Jim bought his home in Laguna Beach, CA, where he has lived ever since.

Jim and Ardelles met when they had booths next to each other at the Sawdust Festival. They watched each other's booth and got to know each other. Ardelles' oldest daughter, Gwen, was the first to work at Jim's photo lab in Dana Point, Capistrano Custom Color. Later, Ardelles worked there retouching the custom photos the lab created. Last of all, Pam, worked there during High School.

Jim married Ardelles Buchta Neil on June 7, 1976 in the gazebo just outside Victor Hugo's restaurant in Laguna Beach.

Before his marriage and after his wife's death, Jim was a person who kept to himself. He loved his time in the military, the area near Fallbrook, photography, fruit trees (both rare and common,) fine dining, dressing sharply, and the arts – especially opera. After his wife's death, he and Pam got season tickets to LA opera and Gloria Kaufman dance at Dorothy Chandler Pavilion in LA. They attended one or more events each month and had a lovely dinner out afterwards. Many times, they took family and friends with them on these outings.

In 1993, Jim and Ardelles' home burned down, along with many others, during the Laguna Firestorm. They lost almost everything, including many valuable and sentimental items (a Salvador Dali print, a tea set from Czar Nicholas, a real piece of eight, family photos, and much more.) Like a phoenix rising from the ashes, their new home was built to their specifications. It was as unique as the two of them and included some special features,

like six stained glass windows by Jo Maes and countertops and bathroom tile by Marlo Bartels. This was not just any old home, this was a giant piece of art, with a roof pitched like a pyramid. It is built to be both fire and flood resistant as well as beautiful.

No description of Jim is complete without bringing up his many fruit trees and the Great Wall of Laguna Beach. Jim built up his orchard of over 40 fruit trees over many years. Some trees require hand pollination, which Jim would undertake, turning a petal on the flower he just pollinated, so he knew which ones were done.

Jim had always wanted to have steps, but couldn't decide what would look right. On a visit to the San Diego Zoo with Pam and Mary, Jim was inspired by some steps in one of the aviaries. While Pam and Mary looked at the birds and animals, Jim was busy planning how to finally finish his backyard. He found an "artist" of landscaping in Alberto or "El Roberto" as Jim would say. (Jim never did pronounce his name correctly.) Jim would order tons of the landscaping bricks necessary for the wall, pick them up himself, in his van, in shifts, or have them delivered by Home Depot and proceed to carry some of them up the hill so Alberto would not have to work so hard. (His doctor told him not to carry anything heavy, so he only carried the 35 lb. blocks up the hill, he left the 60 lb. blocks for Alberto and his son.) Lately, they had been working on the walkways and making finishing touches using some extra tile from the building of the house, interesting bricks, and pieces of stone. It was truly his exercise program of choice and the completion of his vision for his property that he had started when he bought the property. He was lucky to be able to have pretty much finished his project – he would have continued fine tuning it for many years, if God had granted him more time.

Alberto was able to stop by this last week and see Jim in bed. Jim had yet more instructions for additional work. Alberto and his son were very grateful to have a last visit. They noted his instructions for "next week". (Though they didn't know it was going to be his last instructions at the time of their visit, but they carefully noted his last requests). The wall was the centerpiece of his last two Christmas letters and would have been discussed again this coming holiday season.

Jim enjoyed going to annual "rare fruit tree" conventions and applying the knowledge he gained there to his orchard. Jim cared so much for his trees he would often go out in the dead of night to turn on heaters to protect his trees, even in the rain. They were like children to him. During his last week, when Gwen served Jim breakfast and included some of his Cara Cara oranges, he ate them proudly and put his thumbs under the lapels of his shirt and said "I grew these".

Jim was fiercely independent. Pam and Gwen had gone to the first few appointments for Jim's bone cancer. We thought we had made it clear that we were there for him but in his "Jim" fashion he relied on friends and neighbors. Mary and Judith have been taking him to doctor appointments and hospital treatments for the last 2 years. We later learned that Mary had been doing morning breakfast duty for some time. Her son, Nick, is training in

the medical field through the army and Jim had been giving him pointers on “getting what he wanted from his military career.” Nick was providing an increasing amount of help to Jim around his home, but his orders were going to take him out of state at the beginning of March and they finally notified Gwen that “they need help.” This was about the same time that Pam told Gwen, “I think Jim’s definition of ‘Fine’ and mine don’t match. He says he’s fine and then he describes a day that is anything but fine – including falling down several times.” Considering we know he once fell off a ladder and broke his ribs and he put the ladder away before seeking treatment. Possibly the same time, he fell and had a branch go through his arm and didn’t go see a doctor about it until the skin had grown over it and he was indignant that the doctor wouldn’t cut him open to try and find it. The doctor’s “excuse,” he couldn’t find a tree branch on an X-ray and there was no wound to guide him and he wasn’t going to start exploratory surgery on a healed arm. So, we knew anything could actually be wrong and Jim wouldn’t call out. Gwen investigated and started taking him to appointments. Jim was game to continue fighting, but the doctor said that “at 102 lbs and with a PSA of 468, you just don’t have enough mass to fight this any more.” That is when Jim had to enter hospice care.

Even these last few days, he would say “Go home, I AM FINE.” He couldn’t do anything, too weak, but he was safe and comfortable and able to operate TV and radio. He listened to his stock shows and opera. Known, trusted caregivers were hired to help him eat, keep him clean, and comfortable through his last days. Hospice provided medicine, equipment and a frequent nurse visit. Mary continued to drop by and help. His neighbor, Steve, helped care for his beloved trees.

Jim is survived by: stepdaughter, Gwen and her husband, Mark Masters, their daughter, Kristin Masters and her husband, Juan Cadena; stepdaughter, Pam Neil and her partner for life, David Womer; his next door neighbor, Mary Gibian and her two sons, Nick and Reed; 40+ rare and common fruit trees, and his three koi.

Jim was preceded in death by his wife of 33 years, Ardelles and his brother Donald.

Jim will be laid to rest with his wife in Riverside National cemetery without fanfare or family in attendance on April 3, 2020.

The honor guard ceremony with family and friends in attendance will be held when restrictions related to the COVID-19 virus allow assemblies again.

We will announce the time and place of Jim’s memorial after restrictions are eased.

Originally we thought we should engrave “I AM FINE” on his headstone. But, as in life, Jim is sharing eternity with Ardelles, so we chose “We are Fine – Together.”

Cemetery

Riverside National Cemetery

22495 Van Buren Blvd

Riverside, CA,