

JONATHAN BENJAMIN ROBISON

FEBRUARY 13, 1943 - JUNE 9, 2023

ACTIVIST, ATTORNEY, POET, TROUBLE-MAKER

"You have reached the answering machine of Jonathan Robison and several local organizations. We cannot take your call but please leave your name, number, and time of call-or a longer message if you wish-after the beep."

Jonathan Benjamin Robison, 80, died Friday afternoon June 9th. He died peacefully under the care of Canterbury Place, where he went after a particularly debilitating fall in June of 2021. Previously, he lived at Riverview Towers following the 2015 death of his wife Mary Rita Schlichte Robison. Jon and Mary married in 1970 and lived within two blocks of one street in the North Oakland neighborhood of Pittsburgh, PA for all of their 45 years of marriage.

If you lived in Pittsburgh or any neighboring region for any length of time, you were touched by the work that Jon did. He, along with Mary and many others, fought for human rights, voting rights, fair zoning, public transit for all, equal representation, and so much more. He fought for neighborhood preservation, tenants' rights, and disability services and access. He kept peace vigils and hosted Freedom Seders. He fought for years to prevent expressways from dumping thousands upon thousands of suburban cars into the middle of his beloved Oakland neighborhood. Though he got in the way of the powers that be many times, he was only arrested twice (though not for lack of trying). His speeches, and his long moments of silence, were expected and respected at City Council meetings.

Jonathan was born to Gerson and Virginia Laguna Robison in New York City and raised in upstate New York and Connecticut. He was the first of their two children. He was preceded in death by his parents and his wife Mary. He is survived by his daughter, Joy Deborah Robison, son-in-law Ian Hargraves, and two grandchildren, Benjamin and Anahera, all of Rochester, MN. He is survived by his sister, Jude Robison and his brother-in-law Alexander DeVaron of Philadelphia, PA.

Jon got his BA in Math from Wesleyan University in 1964. In the mid-60s as a conscientious objector and peace activist, he joined the Army National Guard serving in the Reserves for over six years, thankful that he was never called to active duty. He moved to Pittsburgh in 1968 and got a Masters in Urban and Regional Planning (MURP) from the University of Pittsburgh in 1976 with a thesis on Community Advisory Boards. He was head of planning for Community Action Pittsburgh, an anti-poverty program. Frustrated to have his efforts stymied by the particular use of zoning and other laws on the books, he went for his JD from the University of Pittsburgh in 1982. This set of degrees allowed him to carry on the five-generation familial tradition of activism and to continue the fight for civil rights and social justice through Zoning, Election, Real Estate, Municipal, and Environmental Law.

Jonathan ran for City Council several times and was an elected Democratic Committeeman for decades in addition to holding various positions in the Fourth Ward Democratic Party. Mary was his campaign manager and strategist for some of Jon's campaigns for City Council and Ward Chair. For decades, the pair of them published an election newsletter twice yearly to inform and engage voters. This newsletter, along with their holiday cards, was mailed out to a list as deep as several thousand people at its peak, and was much anticipated by the recipients.

The diagnosis (such as it was at the time) of Multiple Sclerosis in 1988 only slowed him down to approximately the top speed of his power wheelchair. He kept a law office partnership for many years. Professionally, he often, and knowingly, accepted clients unlikely to pay even his lowest fees. He would encourage use of a well-timed "cease and desist" or "my client is judgement proof" letter, over costlier (and more emotionally-taxing) alternatives. He embraced mediation and the concept of reparative justice long before they were accepted legal pathways. After closing his law office, he then worked at Just Harvest towards food security at policy levels. He was one of the Founders of the Gertrude Steyn Political Club and past President of the Allegheny County Transit Council. He was a member of Bet Tikvah and the Laughing Rivers Buddhist Sangha.

To list every organization he gave his time and energy towards would be a list as tall as the many stacks of books and newspapers in Jon and Mary's home. To list in addition every organization that counted him as a member would be an even more daunting pile. From small neighborhood action coalitions to the National Organization of Women, anywhere there was a just cause to defend, he was somewhere in the midst of it, wearing buttons and carrying signs, sometimes shouting, often singing (out of tune, but with delight and gusto). Jon and Mary saved detailed accounts of all of their progressive work, and it is currently being cataloged and housed in the archives at Heinz History Center to ensure that their momentous work is preserved.

He attended countless art events, from Calliope House to the Pittsburgh Symphony, from Pittsburgh Savoyards to Pittsburgh Ballet Theater, all in addition to the many music and dance performances his wife Mary had a part in. In his semi-retirement, he returned to writing, a passion of his from his early adulthood working as a newspaper reporter in Connecticut. He focused more seriously on his poetry, which he shared at every opportunity. He favored haiku and also wrote longer forms that spoke to his dedication to radical politics, peace, public transportation, human rights, and a more equal distribution of wealth and power.

Please honor his memory by continuing his work and supporting others who do. Hold your elected (and unelected) leaders accountable. Don't give up and don't lose track of your own personal political power. Give as generously as you can, with what you have to offer, what you believe in, and what will make a difference of any measure.

Jonathan will be laid to rest with Mary at Homewood Cemetery on Monday, June 19th. To facilitate the many people across the miles who have been touched by Jon's life and work, there will be a Zoom remembrance and celebration later this summer. Contact his daughter Joy via Jon's email: radrobi13@gmail.com and let her know how you knew her dad. Donations in his memory can be made to alba-valb.org or laborheritage.org or a musical or activist organization that matters to you.

"I have a hard time imagining not being an activist," he admits. "It's the strong personal belief that we can change the world." — from a 2014 interview by Anna Samuels.

Activism Liberates

I am a total activist, or at least I try.
I am committed to activism, not just in my politics,
but in my response to my multiple sclerosis.
That's why I keep up my exercises, p.t.,
with no promises, they will help.
At least it's something I can DO about my MS.
There's no alternative to activism.

Because I am an activist, I am free to listen.
(Of course, I should listen more.)
Free and confident, I can be grateful for criticism.
free to be self-critical.
Free to improve my tactics;
free to change my strategies -
openly, with no apologies.

I want results, passionately.
But I am not dependent on results.

I am free because I am an activist.



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