

Robert H. Webb Obituary

Robert Howard Webb of Lincoln, MA and Brooklyn, NY died August 23, 2018 of Lewy Body Dementia and Parkinson's Disease (PD).

Rob was born October 17, 1934 to Kenneth and Susan Howard Webb, founders of the Farm and Wilderness Camps in Plymouth, Vermont. He spent his childhood exploring the woods and trails of the Green Mountains, cultivating a lifelong love of the outdoors.

Following graduation from Harvard University (AB, Physics, 1955), he obtained a PhD (1959, Physics) from Rutgers University and completed a postdoc (1959-1962, Molecular Physics) at Stanford University. Despite his academic background and several years teaching at Tufts University, he said of himself, "I am an inventor." The majority of his career was spent affiliated with Schepens Eye Research Institute, and Wellman Laboratory at Massachusetts General Hospital, inventing diagnostic medical instrumentation that spawned hundreds of research projects. Among these are the Scanning Laser Ophthalmoscope, the Pneumotonometer, and many applications in confocal microscopy. His work led to and made possible many inventions by others. He was on the faculty of Harvard Medical School as Associate Professor of Ophthalmology and of Dermatology.



Colleagues and students admired Rob for his honest, irreverent way of looking at the world and his ability to expect, demand, and bring out the best in everyone. He was a mentor to colleagues and others in his field including young postdocs; wrote and reviewed for peer-reviewed journals; consulted; and maintained connections with colleagues at SERI, MGH, and elsewhere. Rob was known for being able to sleep through boring and not-so-boring lectures without falling off his chair, then waking and cutting to the core of the lecture with incisive comments. He received numerous awards and honors for his work, which he called "my art." He felt very strongly about being generous with his ideas.

Rob's inventiveness was evident, however, well before he got paid for it. His young family could ill afford a functional car, so Rob kept a series of clunkers on the road. There was the one with no floor in the back seat; this was the marvel of the nursery school carpool set, who would crouch over the hole to watch the road whiz by. There was the car with no front defroster: when it got cold Rob rigged a vacuum cleaner hose from the rear defroster and the front passenger's job was to hold it up to the windshield while Rob drove. Long before TVs had remote controls, Rob invented the "blab off" to cut the sound during commercials, at which time he would serenade the family with his recorder. And, of course, Rob's inventiveness with colorful language was unparalleled.

Rob had the ability to recite just the right poem for any occasion; these ranged from Shakespeare, Blake, and Yeats to "I eat my peas with honey..." He loved music, although he couldn't carry a tune, to his great sadness. His skill at reading aloud was unequalled, and he introduced his daughters to the classics, from Homer to Winnie-the-Pooh. For many years, Rob made silver jewelry and blown glass ornaments. He was an expert, untiring skier, and was patient with skiing companions of all levels. No detour was too long for ice cream. In recent years he enjoyed Dance for PD® with his wife.

People easily recognized Rob from the broad-brimmed hat he always wore, but he struggled with prosopagnosia (face blindness). After learning of the condition in 2006 from The Boston Globe, he would confidently explain to people that he was not snubbing them -- he really did not recognize them.

He was a baby whisperer to four grandkids. Upon hearing that his first grandchild was about to be born, he quipped, "Can't we just go to the local hospital and look at the newborns there? I mean, you've seen one newborn, you've seen them all." He then proceeded to drive through a winter storm to the hospital in Maine, where he immediately began rocking and singing to his grandson with tears in his eyes.

Rob is survived by his wife Sonja Johansson, daughters Kristi Webb (Todd Woerner), Meg Webb (Walter Love), stepdaughters Sarah Johansson Locke and Rebecca Johansson Locke (Eric Sillman), grandchildren Caleb and Sophie Love-Webb, Toby and Lena Sillman, sister Miki Webb, and nieces and nephews. His older sister Sukie Webb Hammond predeceased him.

A memorial service will be held on November 10, 2018 at Cambridge Friends' Meeting House (5 Longfellow Park, Cambridge) at 1:00 p.m. Donations in Rob's memory may be made to the Farm & Wilderness Foundation (www.farmandwilderness.org) and Dance for PD® (<https://danceforparkinsons.org>).