

Philip Edward ("Phil") Gagnon

September 29, 1931 - December 4, 2021

An Ashland, Oregon, resident for more than thirty-five years, Philip (Phil) Gagnon, who died December 4, 2021, has since been deeply missed not only by family and close friends, but by whole "communities": water colorists, calligraphers, the Ashland Food Project, bike and trike cyclists, fellow pickle-ballers, ROMEO (Retired Old Men Eating Out). Whether as founder, leader, or participant, Phil was always the lively spark that ignited enthusiasm, courage, confidence, and plain "good times." (He probably would have used the expression "Joie de Vivre".)

Born in Westbrook, Maine, in 1931, Phil grew up during the Depression in a multi-generational household. His family, descended from French-Canadians, spoke both French and English. In this childhood home, his first "community," young Phil developed habits and talents that he would retain throughout his life. Perhaps his foremost habit was resourcefulness. Although color-blind, he early began drawing and "learning" colors by creating color charts and codes. Decades later, working in advertising and commercial art in both Seattle and San Francisco, his employers must have been amazed to learn that, for Phil, vibrant, true colors were imagined, not seen.

For Phil, a challenge was just that--never an obstacle. He recounted a time when, as a ten- or eleven-year-old, he had gotten separated from his uncle while in the forest. When his uncle returned home alone, Phil's absence caused notice but not undue alarm. They all knew young Phil and that he'd find his way home--which, many hours later, he did.

At 18, Phil enlisted in the navy and was stationed in San Diego, where he served as a draftsman. (As an aside, Phil never uttered a swear word or tasted beer--while in the navy or afterwards.) Independently, he continued developing his art, earning extra money by offering pen-and-ink drawings of private doorways. Phil would simply knock on people's doors, show his portfolio, and make his sales pitch, which most accepted. His success in combining sales and art may well have been responsible for his later career choice in advertising, marketing, and commercial art.

Other early interests that continued into adulthood included sailing, swimming, tennis, and skiing. Years later, he generously shared these with his five children, two step-children, and a multitude of grandchildren. Later skills, like woodworking and home-design/renovation/repair, served him and his family well as he brought every home in which he lived to standards well beyond "House Beautiful."

Phil married his first wife, Flavia (Ann) Brink soon after graduating from San Jose State College (now San Jose State University). Moving to Seattle, where he worked for an advertising firm, he and Ann had their first of five children. Soon, the firm tempted Phil with a promotion, along with an offer to resettle him at their San Francisco office. Let's just admit that he leaped at the chance. For the next few years, he and Ann lived in San Francisco and then moved to San Carlos, then a quiet suburb, to raise their children, who now numbered five. In his spare time, when not working, doing home repairs, or helping raise the children, Phil sanded, painted, and sailed on his favorite wooden sailboat, "The Quiet Woman," moored in Redwood City.

In the early 1970s, Phil and Ann divorced; his former wife moved with the children to Santa Cruz, while Phil began living in Palo Alto. A bachelor's life held no appeal for Phil. Fortunately, in 1973, he met Ann Nichols, who had two sons by a prior marriage. Marrying that same year, they continued living in Palo Alto until the 1980s, then spent a year in San Jose, Costa Rica, volunteering at the Peace University. Upon their return to Palo Alto, Phil did a rather remarkable thing...he and Ann embarked on an eight-year stay in Camden, Maine. (Remarkable because Phil was not really fond of cold weather.)

In Camden, Phil had another "favorite" sailboat, this time, a 20-foot fiberglass Flicka, not surprisingly, he kept in primo shape. His drafting experience served him well here, too, when he drew up improvements to the Camden yacht harbor, presented them at a harbor committee meeting, and saw them adopted! Camden is home to lovely, classically designed wooden boats. Though not owning one, he never tired of observing and drawing them.

Phil's life in Camden also allowed him to be close to his younger brother David, whom he hadn't seen for many years despite frequent letter-writing and phone chats. Skiing and sailing together led eventually to small-plane adventures in which, as David recounts, Phil "got to see his brother, the pilot, in action."

After eight Maine winters, Phil and Ann began exploring warmer alternatives, finding in Ashland, Oregon, in 1994, their ideal community. An avid reader--whether of histories, biographies, spy novels, Maive Binchy's Irish novels, and others--Phil immediately enrolled in Southern Oregon University's OLLI program for seniors. That was merely the beginning... For nearly thirty years, Ashland was the perfect fit for Phil's enthusiastic embrace of life, his aspirations, talents, and skills. And, for their part, from the very beginning, Ashlanders wholeheartedly welcomed both Phil and his wife Ann.

Phil joined the tennis circuits in Ashland and Medford, playing both singles and doubles well into his eighties. Around the time that Phil, in spite of himself, had to start slowing down--slightly--pickleball became popular. He took up that sport and brought his still competitive nature to the games in Lithia Park. Among Phil's other activities was the Ashland Food Project, on whose steering committee he served for ten years, while faithfully collecting neighbors' food donations each weekend.

Eventually, Phil became enamored of cycling, organizing and leading bike and trike tours that often attracted more than a dozen fellow "adventurers." Sometimes they camped overnight, or only Phil did when others opted for motels. These were no simple bike/trike tours, either, as his daughter Suzette would attest. As stated before, Phil loved a challenge and assumed--not always correctly--that everyone else did, too. He especially encouraged novice riders to join him and his group. He wanted to help them overcome fear of traffic, a major impediment to their enjoyment of cycling. Stopping in restaurants or cafes for, in his words, "a cuppa," Phil designed these tours not only to be about nature or local history or cycling etiquette, but about fellowship and fun.

A man of eclectic interests and capabilities, Phil always returned to his childhood loves of drawing and water-coloring, often combining these with calligraphy. (A sample of his beautiful calligraphy is displayed in the Ashland Public Library.) His artistic impulses culminated in his Urban Sketching Group. As with his cycling group, the only "admission tickets" were curiosity, enthusiasm, and an eagerness to improve upon whatever skill level the "applicant" had already mastered--if any at all. And, as always, Phil's aim was not only to teach skills but to inspire confidence, while encouraging everybody to savor each other's company.

On September 29, 2021, Phil celebrated his 90th birthday. Despite past heart problems and operations, he was still actively leading cycling tours and sharing his latest sketches. He was also serving as principal caregiver of his wife, who had been diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease. Less than three months later, on December 4th, he was riding--racing?--toward his cycling group's meeting place when, as he approached. He suffered a fatal heart attack. Death came instantly. It is incredibly comforting to know that, at that moment, Phil was surrounded by friends.

Phil Gagnon is survived by his brother David; daughter Suzette Gagnon-Bailey; sons Charles, Stephen, Pierre, and Kevin; step-sons Trey and Christopher Nichols; and numerous grandchildren, a niece and nephew, two great-grandsons, and two great-granddaughters.