



Cavers signed a birthday shirt for Peter from the 30th annual Texas Cavers Reunion.

Peter Strickland

On July 3, at home with his family by his side and caver-songwriter and Mayan expert Barb MacLeod's cave ballads playing, Peter Strickland, NSS 8298 (FE), opened the door to his next unexplored passage. To chronicle a life so well-lived really requires tales from the many for whom Peter made a difference – as a caver, mentor, volunteer, friend, and family member. In more than a half-century of NSS membership, he helped drive vertical cave exploration, strengthened organized caving and developed many “newbies” into strong cavers. While some of these tales are posted on Facebook and expressed in cards and conversations, much of what we know and love about Peter lives in our hearts and memories—from where we share a snapshot of his life.

Born in 1946 in San Francisco, where his dad had been stationed during WWII, Peter then moved with his family back to their home state of New York to live outside Niagara Falls and Buffalo. As a kid, he liked to find cracks between rocks and climb around in them. With no fear of heights, his father once found him at age 5, 30 feet up in a tree in their yard. In 1964, Pete's older brother, John, read about the NSS in a *National Geographic*, and joined to get the *NSS News*. The brothers attended their first NSS Convention in Bloomington, Indiana, in 1965. Pete decided to join for \$2, as an associate member, in order to get into the convention cheaper (a lifelong monetary trait!) This event was their first interaction with cavers and caves—and also Pete's

introduction to vertical caving, learning about climbing systems and rappel devices, seeing his first Goldline rope and Jumar ascenders. The International Exploration session consisted primarily of descriptions of trips by the University of Texas (UT) Grotto to Mexico's large and deep caves, such as Sótano de Tlamaya and Ventana Jabali (which pushed Surprise Pit in Fern Cave, Alabama, into second place as deepest pit in the Western Hemisphere). Pete realized that Austin, Texas, was the place to be.

In the fall of '65 and spring of '66, the brothers went caving in Pennsylvania and West Virginia. They decided to go to the 1966 NSS Convention in Sequoia National Park, California, accompanied by a caver they'd met at the '65 convention, Charley Townsend, and his 13-year-old brother. After a climbing mishap during the '65 convention, Charley had invented a climbing system he called the Inchworm. It was like a Frog system, but with a Jumar attached between the feet, a rigid bar under the boots, and a strap over the toes. Charley taught the system to Pete; then they rigged a rope outside the meeting hall and taught the system to others. During the convention, Pete went to his first vertical cave, Soldiers Cave, and used his new Jumars. As Pete told it, they were in the “out crowd” of the vertical caving world. The vertical “in crowd” sneaked off with a 1,200-foot piece of Sampson rope and rigged a 1,125-foot drop against the face of a cliff called the Watch Tower. When they returned to camp and described their feat, those in the “out crowd” were very envious (Pete's words). So when the convention ended, they headed for Yosemite Valley. Charley and Pete seized on the idea of rigging the Leaning Tower. They tied Charley's 600-foot rope together with Pete's 200-foot Goldline, borrowing more from a group in the climbers' camp, to total a little over 1,200 feet. Trying different routes to the top over three days, they finally used a route called the Gunsight to get to the backside of the Leaning Tower. They spent a miserable, cold night after darkness overtook them. The next morning, Charley started his descent, using double brake bars on carabiners. He was against the face for about 200 feet and then went free, out of sight and voice contact. After crossing the first knot, he did not notice that his brake bars were twisted, resulting in less friction and an out-of-control descent. He hit the knot at the end of that section hard enough to flip upside down in his seat and bruise his hips when his seat sling stopped him. Continuing to the bottom over multiple knots, he was in no shape to climb

back up. Pete hiked back down, spent the night, then climbed and derigged the next morning. By calculating rope lengths, they estimated the drop to be about 1,200 feet, with the free-hanging portion about 1,000 feet. As Pete said in a 2013 interview with Linda Palit for the *Texas Caver* magazine, “On that trip, we were completely green, but sometimes you get lucky.”

In the fall of 1966, Pete started vertical caving in West Virginia. Unfortunately, he had to drop out of college because of an illness, and Selective Service made him 1A. The Army guaranteed that by enlisting voluntarily—instead of being drafted—guaranteed the first choice of jobs. When Pete's dad, who worked in aerospace, found out that there were no Nike missiles in Vietnam, Pete enlisted and asked to study Nike missile repair. The recruiter called a week later with three options: Fort Monmouth, New Jersey; Fort Bliss, Texas; and Redstone Arsenal, Huntsville, Alabama. No thought needed! Huntsville, vertical caving capital of the Western Hemisphere, would be Pete's home for six months. There he became friends and caved with Dick Graham, Bill Cuddington, Bill Torode, and other active vertical cavers. When the initial descent of Sótano de Las Golondrinas was in the works, Cuddington invited Pete to come, but he could not get out of his Basic Training.

Peter spent two years (1967-69) in the Army in Wiesbaden, Germany. There he met Jim Chester, from Bozeman, Montana, and another soldier, Denny Barnes. They spent most of their leave time caving in Germany, France, and Austria, honing their vertical skills and exploring such great caves as the Gouffre Berger and Pierre San Martin. On one trip near Grenoble, they enabled three cavers to rappel a 1,125-foot pit in one day on new Rhine River rope Peter had bought in Germany. This impressed the French, who had been using a hand-cranked winch and steel cable for just one trip in and out per day!

Upon returning to the States, Pete moved back in with his folks in New York. A trip to Mexico with a group in a rented van from McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, left him determined to make his way to Texas, which was then a hotbed of Mexico caving. However, he did love to tell how they were arrested for “tea bags and oatmeal” and had to pool all their money to get out of jail ... and, on occasion, shared some raunchy British drinking songs learned on the trip. This was the height of the era of aversion to hippies, which leads to other funny stories like wearing a wig to cross the border. No matter the hassle, Pete loved

to go caving in Mexico, and in later years he spent a great deal of time exploring there.

Later in 1969, Pete made his way to San Marcos, Texas, with its active Southwest Texas Student Grotto. There he made many friends and caved with Blake Harrison, Thomas Moore, Joe Sumbera, Jimmy Jarl, Sam Billings and Logan McNatt, among others. There were close caving ties between the central Texas cavers, and in August, 1971, he moved into "The" Kirkwood House (1307½) in Austin. No rooms being available, he was offered a narrow hall at the top of an unused stairwell. Having grown up helping his father remodel the old farm house the family owned, Pete had acquired many construction skills. He devised a platform extending a landing halfway down, slept there and stored his gear under the platform. And thus began the creation of many unorthodox sleeping cubbies such as in the attic, over a porch, and by a greenhouse built out of the garage. Eventually, as cavers moved in and out, Pete became the "landlord." During the 70s, Austin, and the UT Grotto, became known as "the center of the Texas caving universe." The Kirkwood neighborhood, where a half-dozen or more houses were rented by cavers—anchored by 1307½—became a stopping-off, consulting, and pickup point for exploration into Mexico. The inhabitants were surrounded with conversations and activities involving planning trips, showing slides of previous exploits and working on vehicles for the next cave trip. The motto was "work little, cave much!"

Peter had become a talented and committed vertical caver. He helped explore some of Mexico's deepest and longest caves, where his technical climbing and rigging skills came in handy. This included the first descent of Sótano del Barro in 1972 with the 1,500-foot rope he had acquired while in Germany. Some remnants of it still live in his truck as "work rope." Crewing with other Texans to chop through the jungle of the El Abra, they explored Cueva de Tanchipa, Sótano de la Cuesta, and Guaguas. Many trips across Mexico led him to Golondrinas, Huautla, El Arroyo, the river caves of Zoquitlan, and the Cuetzalan area, among many others un-named and but unforgotten. Pete knew the all best camping spots, and the best rigging points for his favorites. In the USA, besides the many pits and caves he did around the Huntsville area, Pete was on several trips to the Silvertip system in Montana's Bob Marshall wilderness. He wasn't too keen on some of the "small groad holes", which he felt constituted many Texas caves. Notable exceptions: Midnight (near Carta Valley), H. T. Miers Cave, Powell's Cave (which he helped stabilize with a new entrance culvert), and Honey Creek Cave.

He continued using the Inchworm climbing system, which worked especially well getting past overhung lips, when others had switched to Ropewalker or Frog. And, he never tired of wetsuit caving—always letting the UT grotto know when the end of season sale at Tom's Dive Shop was coming up. Many a UT caver got their first used suit there.

In spring 1977, when Pete was living in the 1307½ Kirkwood house, Jocie Hooper went to a rope practice in his front yard. She had been caving in the late 60s and early 70s while married to Mills Tandy, one of the "old cavers" (i.e., in their 30s and 40s, instead of teens and 20s). She was trying to get back into caving after their separation. A friend, Terry Sayther, then the UT Grotto president, had told her about the rope session. Pete spied her, called up a mutual friend to get Jocie's phone number, and the rest is history. Their first date was to a midnight viewing of *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, a great favorite of cavers, many of whom knew all the words to all the songs ... which Jocie eventually learned! Pete was completely comfortable that she had a child, 3-year-old Amara, as he wanted some of his own. They soon discovered things in common, like having learned to play the baritone ukulele before taking up the guitar, and knowing all the words to many, many Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and Peter, Paul, and Mary songs, which they spent evenings playing and singing in Jocie's kitchen. Once Pete and Jocie were together, Pete introduced her to Barb's caving ballads.

An ardent NSS supporter, Pete urged Jocie to become a member. It seemed like the Hand of Fate when her NSS number came back as 18298 ... and Pete's was 8298. The two were married in 1979; they left Kirkwood (at that point living with Gill Ediger down the street), and moved to property Pete's folks had bought near Lake Travis. By this time, the whole Strickland clan had abandoned New York and moved to Austin. Through many caving adventures, construction adventures, moves about the property, and the birth of two sons, Colin and Evan, Pete and Jocie were together for 41 years. They and the three kids traveled the U.S. and Mexico, on caving trips and attending NSS conventions. Amara eventually married a British caver, Dave Brook, meeting in Austin while on his post-doctoral assignment. Colin married Guin McDaid, another Austin caver, and they have another wee caver on the way.

To many newer cavers, Pete was known primarily for his portable hot tub, which was a feature at two International Speleology Congresses, 15 NSS Conventions, and 39 Texas Caver Reunions. This invention first appeared at the Texas Speleological Association spring convention in 1978 as a test run for the Texas NSS Convention that year in New Braunfels. It was an instant



Pete as an exploration caver at Silvertip in Montana in 1974 - photo by Mike McEachern

hit. At the 1981 International Congress of Speleology in Bowling Green, Kentucky, it was introduced to cavers from all over the world. At the conclusion of the Congress, Pete invited some cavers from Switzerland, France, and Hungary to come to Austin, and he and Blake Harrison took them to Golondrinas. Many lasting friendships were forged on that trip. Dominique Severina, one of the Swiss cavers, returned to the U.S. several years later and married Blake.

Pete and Jocie had spent the week prior to the Bowling Green ICS helping out with the pre-Convention field camp in Huntsville with Dick and Sherry Graham. Pete had brought an aircraft landing light and lowered it into the bottom of Surprise Pit, illuminating that vast cavity as never before (or probably since). Always wanting to return to the caves he had explored while in the Army, and to share them with Jocie, Pete hoped to attend the 1997 12th ICS in Switzerland, but finances did not allow it. However, in 2005, an invitation from Charley Savvas to visit his parents' home on the island of Rhodes, on the way to the 14th ICS in Greece, was too good to pass up. They met up with Sherry Graham and Charley at the Athens airport, and then spent a lovely week touring the island and being spoiled by Charley's wonderful mother before returning to the mainland for the Congress. When Texas hosted the 2009 15th ICS, Pete was integral to infrastructure planning and execution (including hot tub, sauna, campfire, river cleanup), as well as co-leading, with Aimee Beveridge, a "Giant Caves of Northern Mexico" pre-congress field camp. Less than a year after having a fractured femur pinned, and five months after a 10-hour cancer surgery, Pete and son Colin attended the Moravian Karst pre-Congress

camp for the 2013 15th ICS in Brno, Czech Republic. There, they learned more about the use of lengthy fixed ladders in pits than they had ever wanted to know. After the Congress, they spent a week visiting ice caves and hiking in Austria. He was finally able to show some of his favorite caves from Army days to Jocie and Colin.

Pete's technical and construction skills were unmatched. He liked to joke about his "calibrated eyeballs," which could measure 1/8- or 1/16-inch gaps! Whether building a bridge, dam, house, hot tub, sauna, or cave gate; making cave entrance access, clearing trees, finding firewood for the Groad Hollow (Texas) convention camp each year—or critical details of executing any plan—Pete was there with his equipment and expertise to help make it go smoothly and safely. Always among the first to volunteer to help solve caver-related problems, he also did not suffer fools gladly. Upon hearing of a sketchy or half-baked proposal, Pete would say dryly, "Oh, you think so, do you?" and then proceed to tell how it should be done. For several years, he was involved with the Bustamante Project led by Orion Knox and Rune Burnett, to help the town of Bustamante, Nuevo Leon, Mexico prepare Gruta del Palmito for commercialization. This involved cleaning up graffiti, installing safe steps into the entrance room, trail work, and designing and installing signs along the trail from the parking lot to the cave entrance. Pete always felt the future of caving was getting new people involved, and over the years, he led many a newbie caver on weekend trips through this, one of his favorite caves. His free-climb to place a handline for the Birthday Passage left a lasting impression.

As Pete was providing much of the infrastructure that cavers gathered around ... and under ... to build friendships, he became known for understanding the meaning of caver hospitality. Along with his contributions to conventions and congresses, he and Jocie started hosting Sunday Swims and an



A younger Peter, prior to meeting Jocie

annual Pond Party at "Stricklandia," near Lake Travis in Austin. There, along with his brother John and Bill Stone, he had designed a large concrete dam across a creek running through the property. This project took eight months, many loads of cement, and hundreds of volunteer caver hours. The result: a large, beautiful pond for wildlife and people. Over the years, numerous caver kids have learned to swim there. At his last Swim Party, a baby shower for Colin and Guin, on June 10, Pete had his "damn" construction slides out, chronicling the event for any viewers interested. Fittingly, family and friends gathered on August 25 for the Peter Strickland Memorial Pond Party. More than a hundred people, including guests flying or driving in from three coasts, the Rockies, New Mexico and all over Texas, spent an afternoon, night and morning of hot tubbing, swimming, camaraderie and merriment in his honor. Pete would have loved it.

**Compiled by John Strickland,
Jocie Hooper, Jay Jorden, Sherry
Graham, and Logan McNatt**



Colleen O'Connor Olson

1966-2018

Best known as an Interpretive Ranger at Mammoth Cave National Park for the past 25 years, Colleen Dawn O'Connor Olson passed away on September 14, 2018 in her Cave City, Kentucky, home following years of cancer treatments. She is survived by her husband, Rick Olson, and her sister, Heather Barker, of Seattle, Washington.

Selected as Mammoth Cave's Guide of the Year twice, Colleen earned the Ed Bishop Award for Research an unprecedented three times. In addition to peer recognitions, which included the You're My Inspiration Award, she also was bestowed the Keeper of the Light lifetime achievement award in recognition of her contributions over the 25 years she worked at Mammoth Cave.

Colleen Olson was a prolific writer,

publishing five books on various Mammoth Cave aspects such as the cave history, the railroad, and anecdotal lore. All may be found on Amazon. She also wrote the History chapter for the compendium Mammoth Cave: A Human and Natural History, published in 2017 by Springer International.

Colleen was born to Clara May O'Connor and Robert Talmadge O'Connor in Bellingham, Washington, on December 18, 1966. She graduated from Lake Stevens High School in 1985 and from Central Washington University, in Ellensburg, Washington, in 1989. After working for the Fred Harvey Company at Grand Canyon, Colleen began employment at the Mammoth Cave Hotel in 1992. She became an Interpretive Ranger at Mammoth Cave National Park the following year and served in that capacity until her retirement in 2018.

Colleen's husband, Rick Olson, is the Mammoth Cave Park Ecologist and a NSS and CRF member. "This is the saddest thing ever for me in my life," he shared in an email. "Colleen and I were perfect for each other. We all hope someday to find that ideal person, and for me, it was Colleen."

Friends and coworkers described Colleen as a mentor, beloved, inspirational, smart, funny, and strong. "She was an excellent and exemplary Park Service Ranger," a friend commented. "Colleen worked very hard to enrich the lives of countless visitors."

In eight years of being personally acquainted with Colleen, I knew her to be witty, intelligent, and fun to be with. I loved chatting with her about journalism and literary subjects.

An entomologist and fellow researcher recalled that "Colleen asked thought-provoking and interesting questions. Our last communication was over zombie crickets. While I had published on horsehair worm infections in crickets at Mammoth, I had not thought about it in terms of zombie behavior. She got me thinking and finding out that the worms burst out of infected crickets and then lay eggs to infect the next unsuspecting victim. I also found that the crickets could survive the worms busting out of their abdomen, which is both really gross and intriguing."

Private services were held locally, and a family gathering will be held in Washington. A celebration of Colleen's life for friends and cavers will be held next August at the Mammoth Cave Hotel.

In lieu of flowers or other gifts, the family asks that donations be made to the Friends of Mammoth Cave National Park, a nonprofit organization with close ties to the park (<https://www.nps.gov/macac/getinvolved/donate.htm>).

Gary Gibula