



## H. Peter Karoff

May 16, 1937 - March 9, 2017

H. Peter Karoff, a renowned contributor to the world of philanthropy and a business leader in Boston, died at his home in Santa Barbara on March 9. He was 79. The cause of death was complications from pancreatic cancer.

Beginning with his early work as a founding member of the Foundation for Urban Negro Development in Boston, Peter was a champion of civil rights and social justice. He discovered his true calling in strategic philanthropy when in 1988 he introduced a friend, who happened to be the CEO of a major corporation looking to initiate a corporate giving program, to another friend, the film-maker Henry Hampton, who was struggling to find funding for the second installment of his civil rights documentary *Eyes on the Prize II*. Inspired by the idea of matching wealth to need, in 1989 Peter founded The Philanthropic Initiative (TPI), a pioneering non-profit consulting firm dedicated to increasing the impact of philanthropy in society. Over the next 25 years under Peter's guidance and direction, TPI became a leading influence in the world of philanthropy. Whether working with individual donors and families or large foundations and corporations, Peter employed empathy and wisdom to align donor goals and values with historically underserved communities and populations, and with projects that sought to advance the human condition through art and culture. The richness and depth of his commitment to progressive causes reflected his core belief in the ethical and moral purpose of philanthropy, which he realized throughout both his personal and professional life. The impact of Peter's humanism, generosity, compassion, lyricism and mentoring were deeply felt by people from all walks of life, and will be missed by all who knew him.

Peter frequently spoke and wrote on philanthropic and social issues. His book on philanthropy, *The World We Want*, was published in 2007, and he was the editor of the 2004 collection *Just Money—A Critique of Contemporary American Philanthropy*. For 25 years prior to founding TPI, Peter was prominent in the real estate and insurance industries in Boston.

Peter's love of poetry was legendary, and his need to poeticize was constant and

inveterate. He practiced the art over many years, on his family (epically), friends and colleagues, in speeches around the country and abroad, in classrooms at Columbia where he earned an MFA in poetry at the age of 51, and at Tufts University, Boston University and the University of California, Santa Barbara, where he taught both philanthropy and poetry. His last class was a poetry seminar he taught in fall 2016 through the Vista Program in Santa Barbara entitled “Poetry and Metaphor—Living a Life of . . .” Peter's poetry has been published and anthologized, and his first book of poems, *Parable*, will appear this spring.

Over the years, Peter was on the board of more than 30 nonprofit organizations, including Roxbury Development Corporation, Business Executives for National Security, WGBH Educational Foundation, Boston University's Institute for Nonprofit Management and Leadership, the Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service at Tufts University, and Blackside Productions. He was a Fellow of the MacDowell Colony and a 2006 Purpose Prize Fellow. Most recently, he was active in the GHR Foundation, Robina Foundation, and the Santa Barbara Foundation. Upon his move with his wife Martha to Santa Barbara in 2008, he embraced a West Coast philanthropic community and new cohorts of leaders to mentor, as he had done for decades on the East Coast.

H. Peter Karoff was born in Brockton, MA, on May 16, 1937, to George and Sadie Karoff. He graduated from Brandeis University in 1959, earned an MFA from Columbia University in 1988, and received an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters from Lesley University in 2002. It was at Brandeis that he met his wife and the love of his life, Martha Conant, who predeceased him in 2015. They married young in 1956 and had four children by the time he was 25. For Peter, family was everything, and gatherings over Christmas and Thanksgiving—often with 30 or more at the table—made for great joy and enduring memories. Peter was an avid sailor, whose passion for the water occasionally met with mishap, and he was affectionately referred to as Crash Karoff at the local boatyard. But his children never wavered in their confidence and they fearlessly sailed with him in the waters of Buzzard's Bay and Martha's Vineyard, where the family spent many happy summers. His love of place—West Newton and Chappaquiddick, Massachusetts, and Santa Barbara—leaves his family with many memories, and many poems.

Peter will be deeply missed by his daughters Deborah Karoff of Santa Barbara, CA, Lorinda Karoff of Brooklyn, NY, Rebecca Karoff of Austin, TX, and son Thomas Karoff of Armonk, NY, and their devoted spouses, Anna DiStefano, Jeffrey Younger, Brad Wolbert, and Pamela Furtsch. He leaves behind seven beloved grandchildren ranging in age from 25 to 8: Jacob and Sophie Wolbert, Kaeli and Emma DiStefano-Karoff, and Devon, Sarah and Lauren Karoff. Peter also leaves behind his brother- and sister-in-law, Richard M.

Karoff and Sandra Manzella, along with three nephews, David Karoff, Paul Karoff and John Karoff, and their wives and children, with whom he enjoyed wonderfully close relationships.

Peter dearly loved his family, his home, his community, art, music, and sailing. Most of all, he loved his life with his soul mate of 59 years, Martha.

What I do what we all do is write the poem of life  
You see it isn't a matter of time but compassion  
Call it community or hope or faith or call it love.  
That is the flow that is the poem.

– “If I Had More Time,” from Parable

Services are planned in Santa Barbara on May 12 at 2:00 p.m. at the University Club, and in Newton, Massachusetts on June 11 at 2:00 p.m. at the First Unitarian Society of Newton, 1326 Washington Street, Newton, Ma. Additional information about service arrangements may be found at <http://www.wrhsb.com/obituaries/>.

Donations in memory of Peter may be made to the Karoff Fund for Leadership in Philanthropy, a fund which will be used to fund and disseminate research, writing, and other projects that inform, inspire, and support the next generation of philanthropic leaders. Donations may be made: The Boston Foundation:  
<https://www.crowdrise.com/karoff-fund-for-leadership-in-philanthropy/fundraiser/bostonfoundationinc>

Donations in memory of Peter may also be made to:

Santa Barbara Foodbank: <https://donate.foodbanksbc.org/checkout/donation>

Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program: <https://www.bhchp.org/make-gift>

# Events

---

**MAY** **Memorial Service** 02:00PM

**12**

---

University Club of Santa Barbara

1332 Santa Barbara St., Santa Barbara, CA, US, 93101

**JUN** **Memorial Service** 02:00PM

**11**

---

First Unitarian Society of Newton

1326 Washington St., Newton, MA, US, 02465

# Comments

---



“ I've had the privilege of knowing some truly great human beings, and Peter Karoff was clearly one of them. With his profound commitment to "the human possibility"—which he evoked with everything from philanthropy to poetry to personal presence—he was a living inspiration, and he will be sorely missed. We need a lot of Peter Karoffs in this world: may his life inspire many of us to follow his example as best we can, knowing that Peter would want each of us to find our own path of service. — Parker J. Palmer

**Parker J. Palmer** - April 13, 2017 at 09:26 AM

---



“ Of the many memorable efforts Peter led was a 3 day course, Poetry and Metaphor that he led last Fall for VISTAS Lifelong Learning Program. He left all of us who were fortunate enough to experience his class a rich and memorable gift. He was the epitome of a renaissance man.

Barbara Margerum

**Barbara Margerum** - March 25, 2017 at 07:23 PM

---



“ Peter was one those rare people that was beloved and respected by all. My connections with him were from Social Venture Partners (introduced to it at his house), both Bostonians, both felt that Martha's Vineyard was one of our favorite places on the planet and we interacted frequently at the Saturday Farmer's Market. He made me feel good every time I met him. Total class and all heart, an unbeatable combination!

Condolences to the family but we can all take solace in the fact that the world is a better place because of Peter.

Glenn Bacheller

**glenn bacheller** - March 25, 2017 at 04:36 PM

---



“ I loved my walks with Peter, where discussions of life's ambitions, family and poetry would all fuse together. I always left feeling inspired and grateful for my friendship with this lovely man. He was a true mentor, and difference-maker!

**Seth Streater** - March 24, 2017 at 03:36 PM

---



“ I had the privilege of co-teaching many graduate seminars with Peter over the years. He devoted his life to philanthropy in the service of social justice, bringing his knowledge, networks, and passion to those global studies students who were fortunate to be in his classes. Teaching with Peter was a joy; he brought poetry into the classroom, and his expansive heart into everything he did. Peter was an unbridled optimist, full of the joy of life, even as his own life at the end was marked by loss and pain. He was my colleague, friend, and mentor. I will miss him greatly.  
- Rich Appelbaum

**rich appelbaum** - March 24, 2017 at 02:39 PM

---



“ I can't help smiling back at that photo of Peter! I have warm memories of his personal support and great respect for Peter's life work.  
  
Anita Perez Ferguson

**Anita Perez Ferguson** - March 24, 2017 at 10:53 AM

---



“ We mourn the passing of Peter Karoff, former visiting professor of global studies at UC-Santa Barbara and a great supporter of our program. He was one of the country's leading experts in philanthropic organizations. Farewell Peter, you'll be missed.

**Mark Juergensmeyer** - March 23, 2017 at 08:47 PM

---



“ Sweet-hearted Peter, one man who could embody the heart of community on his own, but never would stand alone, always honoring the contributions of others. I will miss his thoughtful reflections and authentic ways. Blessings dear Peter, with gratitude for all you have done to inspire business philanthropy and the Santa Barbara community. I miss you already.

**Judy Hawkins** - March 23, 2017 at 02:05 PM

---



“ Peter and TPI was our family's first introduction to strategic philanthropy with resulted in 28 years of grantmaking in Massachusetts and a lifelong commitment to serve others. Peter's enthusiasm and brilliance was palpable. Our condolences for your loss. Peter affected so many you may never meet. Elizabeth Sheehan

**elizabeth sheehan** - March 23, 2017 at 11:13 AM



“ The many times Peter ended a meeting where all the other participants were feeling disappointed or frustrated that not enough progress had been made by saying, simply and enthusiastically, "Terrific!" or "Onward!" Never failed to lift my spirits and those of all who were present.

**Ron Gallo** - March 21, 2017 at 11:36 PM



“ Of the many memorable efforts Peter led was a 3 day course, Poetry and Metaphor that he led last Fall for VISTAS Lifelong Learning Program. He left all of us who were fortunate enough to experience his class a rich and memorable gift. He was the epitome of a renaissance man.

Barbara Margerum

**Barbara Margerum** - March 25, 2017 at 07:05 PM



“ I teach philanthropy to advisors and nonprofit gift planners. The moral or poetic core is Peter's work. He did elevate the discourse. Missing him mingles now with gratitude for his gifts and giftedness. He kept something essential alive, and because he did, it lives now in others. His legacy is our patrimony. No one ever owns it, a gift. Like love circulating or like grace.

**Phil Cubeta** - March 27, 2017 at 10:49 AM



“ It was a privilege to be a cousin of Peter Karoff. We met together in family and then again in poetry. So dynamic, so much outgoing warmth.

**Ellen M. Berger** - April 19, 2017 at 06:09 PM



“ I am privileged to have worked with you as part of Deutsche Bank's Wealth with Responsibility program. You were my inspiration to pursue a career in philanthropy at the Bank. Your work and generous spirit has impacted the legacy of so many generations and still guides my philanthropic strategy today.

**Alessandra DiGiusto** - April 28, 2017 at 12:50 PM



“ Peter set the philanthropic bar high with his creative, joyful and strategic planning. It was my great pleasure to know him for 25 years and to admire him and his work more with each year. He was the epitome of an open-minded, open-hearted generosity that will continue to inspire us both professionally and personally for our lifetimes.

**Shirley Fredricks** - May 04, 2017 at 03:07 PM



“ Peter encouraged and blessed me personally and professionally. Can't you just picture him saying "Terrific." His professional accomplishments were remarkable, but he never seemed to have his identity there. He had those "eulogy virtues" in spades and we all wanted to be around him. Go in peace dear friend.

**DAVID BEATTY** - June 08, 2017 at 06:38 AM