



Every Kid, His Kid: the Wealth of Dan Levinson

by Tim Pearson

I'm one of Dan n' Nancy's kids. I first walked into Dan Levinson's classroom at Nome-Beltz High School in September 1974. My assignment was to pass Freshman Biology. His mission was to teach life.

As a freshman, you noticed three things about Dan. First, his red socks. Not just red, but bright red. Really, really bright red. They were his famous lucky trademark.

Second, you noticed his black 1958 VW Beetle. Into that Beetle he squeezed himself, his wife, Nancy, and two collies – gorgeous animals with long, sensitive noses and deep, expressive eyes. The Beetle covered every mile of the Seward Peninsula's road system. Dan n' Nancy (as they preferred to be called) and collies covered the rest by foot, from the 4,717 summit of Mt. Osborn to the granite spires of Serpentine Hot Springs.

Third, when you went on field trips with him, you also noticed that trail food included "Mocha Kaffee Mit Schlag" or "Schlag" for short. You knew you had arrived when he offered you a cup. And you knew you were truly embarked on a grand adventure when he shared his recipe.

He taught Freshman Biology, but with a twist: every one of his kids had to pass his tests. Some of us did so on the first try, others of us on the third or fourth . . . with tutoring. And when it came to the test on STD's, he was emphatic that passing could be a matter of life or death. Biology was nothing, if not practical.

Dan announced that the following summer, he and Nancy would lead a weeklong field trip to Glacial Lake, a remote spot nestled like an elongated figure-eight in a steep glacial valley of the Seward Peninsula. Five students hiked in twelve miles across the tundra, each pursuing a science project. My tentmate, Steve Longley, went after butterflies with his net and for fun, filled a quart jar with mosquitoes.

I looked for signs of the red salmon that Inupiat elders said lived in the lake. Dan asked me to answer: "Are there red salmon? And if so, could the salmon run be enhanced to provide a sustainable resource?"

One summer turned into a five year adventure. We rediscovered one of Alaska's most northern runs of red salmon – nothing to ever rival Bristol Bay, but it taught my brother Mark and me how to question, how to think and how to spend summers alone in the Arctic, counting red salmon for five weeks at a stretch. We were 14 and 16 years old.

Life lessons from the man the tallest Seniors called "Levi": "You learn when you listen." "Take nothing but pictures; don't even leave footprints." "Ask questions and look for answers in the data." "Life is about exploring inner and outer landscapes." And above all, "Leave no one behind. A class (and a community) travels together."

Dan grew wealthy in the way the best teachers do over time. It's estimated that he had 2,000 kids as students in Nome from 1970 to 1990. Today those students are citizens, public servants, mayors, council members, and school board presidents across the Seward Peninsula and beyond. Scott Pegau received his Ph.D. as an arctic oceanographer; Allison Kelliher is in her third year of medical school at the University of Washington; Karen (Booth) McLane is completing her training as a Nurse Practitioner; numerous others went on to become teachers.

One student said: "He was good at seeing what you were and helping you be more of it." Another: "He taught those he knew to believe in themselves." And another: "I especially appreciated you letting me dissect that human hand you gave to me for a Science Fair project . . . truly one of my favorite high school memories! My intense fascination with such things led me to earn a degree in criminology . . ."

When he and Nancy retired to Homer, Dan worked for the Community Mental Health Center, volunteered at the Center for Alaskan Coastal Studies and taught judo at the Smoky Bay School. He influenced at least another 800 kids.

The black 1958 Beetle is now for sale at the end of the road. Dan Levinson died at home of kidney cancer on Oct. 14th. He was 68. Alaska is poorer by one and richer by 2,800. But we, his 2,800 students, are the true wealthy ones. We're Dan n' Nancy's kids.

DAN LEVINSON'S RECIPE FOR MOCHA KAFFEE MIT SCHLAG:
(to sustain your next adventure; shared with Nancy's permission)

Place the following into a mug:

- one heaping teaspoon of Ghirardelli's Ground Sweetened Chocolate & Cocoa (without this brand of chocolate, it isn't Dan's)
- one rounded teaspoon of instant coffee
- three teaspoons sugar (or to taste)
- one tablespoon of whipping cream or cream substitute
- add boiling water and fill to 1/2 inch from mug rim
- stir
- garnish with whipped cream or whipped topping with a touch of cinnamon on top.

Serve and sip thoughtfully.

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