

White River Junction

Charles M. McKenna

(September 22, 1935 - February 20, 2021)

Charles Marshall McKenna, 85, died peacefully at home on Saturday, February 20, 2021. Charlie was born September 22, 1935 in Hanover, NH, the son of Charles and Helen (Findlen) McKenna.



He was raised in Norwich and graduated from Hanover High School class of '53. Charlie earned a bachelor's degree from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Aeronautical Engineering and a master's in Mechanical Engineering.

He moved to Seattle to work at Boeing Aerospace before enlisting in the U.S. Air Force where he was a pilot. Charlie received an honorable discharge to enter a Trappist Monastery in Berryville, VA. After two years he decided the priesthood was not a good fit so he took a position at Sikorsky Aircraft in Stratford, CT.

Charlie married Mary E. McKenna in 1964 in Westport, CT., her hometown. They lived in Connecticut for five years and later moved with their son and daughter to Raymertown, NY to work for Rensselaer Research Corporation. Feeling the pull to come home to Vermont, they moved to Norwich in 1975, where Charlie designed and built a solar-heated house and garage on land his parents owned in Beaver Meadow. This house was one of the first solar buildings in the area and took three years to complete. Charlie also cofounded Citizens for Responsible Area Growth to safeguard the local environment in the face of airport expansion. Professionally, Charlie worked at Dartmouth as an engineer for seven years, leaving to work for the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers at CRREL. He transferred to the Corps' Topographic Engineering Center (TEC) in Alexandria, VA until his retirement in 2003.

Charlie was passionate about the environment and thought deeply about the immense challenges that the changing climate presents, but he was also hopeful. He recently wrote that "tearing down the structures of racial and cultural injustice must begin before there can be a full-throated and successful challenge to climate change". He was a member of the Executive Committee of the Vermont Sierra Club. Charlie wrote many papers on climate change and presented them in venues in the U.S. and Canada.

Charlie loved flying and received his pilot's license at age 16. As a teenager, he co-owned an airplane with a friend. Later in life he bought a homebuilt experimental airplane and worked on it for years. One of his dreams was to construct a car/airplane—he called it a road eagle.

Another great love was music and he played several instruments as a teenager. He especially loved the music of Bach and Charlie Parker. Charlie encouraged his children's musical abilities and his son became a professional jazz saxophonist. His daughter is an accomplished amateur violinist and psychologist.

Other interests: he was an avid skier and Stowe was his favorite mountain. He enjoyed a cottage in Friendship, ME where the family returned to for years. He also loved road trips, BMW motorcycles and Heady Topper beer.

But most of all, he adored his children and two grandchildren—Charlie was a gentle, loving soul with a grand sense of humor and he will be sorely missed. He is survived by his beloved wife Mary of Wilder, and their two children — John McKenna of Barrington, RI (Erin Rider and Aidan); and Patricia McKenna of Chicago (Douglas Knapp and Lennie). His loving sister, Sharon McKenna of New York City also survives him in addition to numerous cousins.

Knight Funeral Home in White River Junction, VT assisted with arrangements. Condolences may be expressed in an online guest book at www.knightfuneralhomes.com.

To honor Charlie, please consider a gift to the Vermont Chapter of the Sierra Club, PO Box 492, Montpelier, VT. There will be a celebration of his life when we can gather safely.