

Eulogy for Richard Snibbe

By Scott Snibbe, grandson, son of Paul Snibbe

Late one fall in the early 1970s, when I was five years old, Grandpa came for the first time from New York City to visit our family in the beach town of Scituate, Massachusetts. In my first conscious memories of him, he and his second wife Pat are running and twirling on the beach in long, wool New York overcoats, smiling, laughing and cursing as their shoes soak with sea water.

At that time my parents did everything from scratch, just like Paul and Linda McCartney – they made all our clothes and built our furniture; they worked at home and cooked all-natural meals every night at home. Grandpa steamrolled all over that when he found out that I had never been out to eat at a restaurant and insisted on taking my parents and I out to dinner and paying for a baby-sitter for Kris and Kim. When the waitress came to our table, grandpa pointed at me and told me to order. “This is a restaurant – you can ask for anything you like and they’ll bring it to you,” he explained. “Ice cream!” I immediately exclaimed, without hesitation. My parents protested, but grandpa insisted, “This is his first time at a restaurant – let him have whatever the hell he wants!” So, while my parents and grandpa enjoyed lobsters, I ate my way through a huge dish of vanilla.

I’d like to share a little bit about grandpa’s family history, since people often ask where our truly comedic last name comes from. As one of my brother’s friends once said, “Snibbe – it’s a name you want to scream at the top of your lungs!” Pat called grandpa “Snibbe” or “Snibs” and as I go around the country visiting the few Snibbes of the world (if you meet one, we’re related), their closest friends and partners often refer to their loved one in the same way.

Born on Halloween, 1916, Grandpa was one of six children in a prosperous Maryland family. His father, George Schnibbe, was a first-generation German immigrant and industrialist who established one of the original textile factories in the country. During World War I, the US Government needed George to produce uniforms for the Army, but congress had passed a law that no German-American owned firms could be used as army contractors. In order to get around this, the government asked him to change his name to sound less German, and he willingly complied, removing the “ch” from our last name and becoming very wealthy. Great Grandpa George was a devote catholic whose one dream was to visit Saint Peter’s basilica in Vatican City. After building his fortune, he sailed to Italy and finally faced this magnificent and holy building. As he walked up its steps, he had a sudden heart attach and died before stepping inside its walls.

Grandpa’s mother, Mildred Robinson, was blue-blooded east-coast aristocracy, with a pedigree that traced back to John Robinson, one of the organizers of the Mayflower Journey, who lived in exile in Leyden, Holland, serving as the pastor of the Pilgrim’s church. Robinson wrote a beautiful letter to the Pilgrims as they left for the new world, some of which was later incorporated into the Mayflower Compact. Robinson wrote in that letter:

“...we are carefully to provide for peace with all men what in us lieth, especially with our associates. And for that, watchfulness must be had that we neither at all in ourselves do give, no, nor easily take offense being given by others.”

Fantastic advice for a happy life that no Snibbe, including myself, seems to have been able to heed.

Mildred was entranced by culture and the arts and often traveled to New York City where she spent time at the Algonquin Hotel and other haunts of the well-to-do. Her mental and physical health declined early in Grandpa's life and he was raised by his African-American nanny, whom grandpa expressed great love and admiration for as long as I knew him.

Grandpa has only shared a few memories of his childhood with me. One that sticks in my mind is the time that his father bought a brand new Ford. Grandpa, at sixteen, wanted to impress a girl he had a crush on and, without a single driving lesson, “borrowed” the car to drive by her house. As he drove by, waving to her on the porch and smiling broadly, he smashed into a tree right in front of her house and totaled the car.

Grandpa wanted to study architecture since he was a boy. He asked advice of an architect he knew, who told him to first get a good liberal education. During the Great Depression, grandpa had the privilege to study at St. John's College in Maryland, where, becoming aware of the great contrast of his privilege and the condition of the country, he joined the American Communist Party, becoming an early champion for equal rights in labor and life. His politics really stuck out among his five other conservative siblings, one of whom later became the chief of police in Monterey, and another, the head of the Napoleon Society of America.

When Grandpa graduated from college, in 1939, he and a friend went on a bicycle tour of Europe with an extensive tour through Germany! I have never been able to get a good answer from him on what made him think this would be a good idea after Hitler's annexing of Czechoslovakia and Austria. Grandpa told me a great story of him and his buddy sitting in a German beerhouse when SS officers entered. Everyone in the bar went silent, stood up and raised their arms in salute. Grandpa and his friend remained sitting and the officers came over to them and began to yell in German. “We're Americans on a bike tour of your beautiful country,” he simply said, and the officers shrugged, puzzled, and let them be.

Grandpa was accepted into the prestigious Graduate School of Design at Harvard in 1940 where he studied with Walter Gropius, founder of the Bauhaus and pioneer of modern architecture. This was the seminal event of his life, and he spoke the names “Gropius” and “Corbu” more than any others, nearly up until the time of his death. Grandpa saw architecture as a profoundly positive utopian force that could transform our every day lives into a continuous stream of beauty and awe, if only we could get rid of the damn postmodernists.

Grandpa served as coach of Harvard's Lacrosse team and played a brave early role in the civil rights movement when their team, with their recently added first African-American

team member, arrived at the Naval Academy in Annapolis to play a game. The rear admiral superintendent of the Academy confronted grandpa and insisted that their black team member be withdrawn – he would not allow his men to share the field with a black man. Grandpa refused to play under these terms and his actions ultimately resulted in Harvard establishing strong anti-segregation policies for all campus activities three decades before the nation’s move towards desegregation in the 1960s. There’s a detailed story in the Boston Globe posted to Richard’s website all about this.

When World War II broke out, Grandpa immediately tried to join the army, but was refused because of his communist background. Instead, he was put to work as an architect. Grandpa described the tedium of his first assignment, to move all of the bathrooms on plans for an American submarine from the left side of the ship to the right to make room for torpedo launchers. Before computers this work was completely done by hand.

In the prosperity of the early 1950s Grandpa moved to Manhattan and joined the firm of New York Architect Edward Stone, designer of the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC, where he had the chance to work on his most prominent projects. Grandpa made substantial design contributions to the creation of the New Delhi Embassy and contributed its most original design element – the concrete latticework “curtain” which echoes classical Indian screens while ecologically reducing heat. He used this same element in the design of the Stanford Hospital, where my girlfriend Ahna was born. Grandpa had an appreciation for minor architectural gems, which he pointed out to me even in his last days. He wrote a book called *Small Commercial Buildings* in 1956 which is still regularly referenced.

Richard went on to establish his own firm, *Ballard, Todd and Snibbe*, with two partners, where he worked for many years on projects in public housing, education and private residences. Grandpa had a fantastic imagination, which came out in full force in the utopian 1960s and dystopian 1970s with designs such as his *Handloser Project* – a community of buildings suspended from steel cables in the rocky mountains for a future where land is scarce. This building is documented in the book *Unbuilt America*.

At thanksgiving two years ago at my house, in his hazier state after his first stroke, grandpa refused to take even a single bite out of his turkey dinner because he was “waiting for Ballard to arrive.”

Grandpa had two wonderful children, my father Paul and my uncle John, who are here today and you can probably recognize as Snibbes without me pointing them out. Their mother Miriam Bergman was a talented abstract expressionist painter who was friends with the painters Jackson Pollock, Seth Olitzky and Friedal Dzubas, with whom my grandmother and father studied painting. The contemporary New York art world was part of their everyday experience growing up and gave the kids a profound appreciation for abstract art that my dad and mom passed to all of us kids. Honestly, I didn’t even know about representational art until I took my first Art History courses at college.

In my teens I started going to visit Grandpa in New York City a few times a year. He let me stay in his architect’s office on a little bed which was truly magical – the way Grandpa

divided the space of his Grammercy Park duplex was phenomenal – lots of small boxes of space, lights and surprises, a little river next to the kitchen filled with glass balls and crossed by a small flat bridge leading to the living room where we often ate pints of Haagen Dazs vanilla ice cream late into the night. Honestly, as a teen I mostly wanted to visit New York to troll the village and see rare films. But Grandpa and his second wife Pat were so enthusiastic that I hardly left their apartment, and they were so talkative that I think there were times that I didn't speak a word for several days. Grandpa and Pat had a big library of videotapes, and as someone interested in film, I looked over the library hungrily. But grandpa and Pat's favorite movie was Julia Roberts' breakthrough *Mystic Pizza* which we must have watched six times, late into each night. I didn't have the heart to deprive them of their joy, which was magnificent, as they watched this story of three girls working in a Connecticut pizza parlor.

Grandpa would fill up his wallet with hundred dollar bills, put on his Harvard jacket, overcoat and hat, call a cab and take me on architectural tours of the city. I remember him bringing me to the magnificent atrium of the Ford foundation, filled with a forest of exotic trees and plants. To the Citibank building, where he told me fantastic stories of its sinking foundation and the humiliation and bravery of the engineers who fessed up to the mistake and solved the problem. I remember him having the cab drive by the AT&T Building, recently designed by Philip Johnson and asking me what I thought. "Wow, it's pretty unique – the lack of detail, but the way it looks like a dresser – kind of funny, like a cartoon". "It's a piece of crap" he said back to me. "Architecture shouldn't be a joke, it should be *magnificent*."

I think my fascination with Grandpa began at fifteen, when we moved back to the east coast from California. We stopped in New York and stayed with Richard for a few days. The first night there, he took us out to a fantastically expensive restaurant. As a rebellious New Wave teenager, I ordered the weirdest thing on the menu – a plate of baby octopus. When it arrived it was disgusting. Sitting next to grandpa, I asked him if I could have some of his pasta, which looked great. "The hell you can!" he said, "Order your own!" I was taken aback, but did order something else after he kept prodding me. When the bill came he insisted on paying and I saw him leave a 30% tip. His weird combination of aggression, love and generosity really struck me at that moment!

Grandpa told phenomenal stories of his architectural colleagues – stories that featured a who's who of modernism including Louis Kahn, Marcel Breuer, Philip Johnson, Le Corbusier (known as "Corbu" to grandpa). He took me to lectures at the American Institute of Architects in New York, where he was a proud Fellow, and introduced me to a few of these giants. He showed me the power of design in everyday objects. A colleague of his had designed the Bell Telephone of the 1950s and one day grandpa violently showed me some of its design features. Without warning, grandpa grabbed the telephone and threw it to the floor. "Scotty, look at that," he said. "What?" I asked. "My friend designed that phone – it's indestructible. Now, look at those four bumps on the base – you see how they prevent the phone from hanging up even when you knock it over? Genius."

He told me another story of bringing a small set of drawings to a client as a first design deliverable, who, leafing through them, asked “How long did these take you?” wondering what he had paid so much for. Grandpa angrily slammed his folio shut and said, “Three days – *and thirty years!*” I think of this story every time I deliver a design proposal of a few brief pages to a client who’s just paid many thousands of dollars for it. Grandpa taught me the power of elegance and simplicity – to use absolutely no more words, lines or material to express an idea than is necessary. As Grandpa often quoted Mies van der Rohe “less is more”.

Grandpa never hesitated to give unsolicited personal, career and even fashion advice. Sometimes all at once. As a teen and then college student, I used to dress outlandishly in what one of my teachers once called “Ray Charles outfits”. Bright high-water pants, Chinese slippers, a dress shirt, loud tie from the 1960s and a patterned polyester suit jacket. When I walked through his door one day in the late 1980s, grandpa grabbed me by the arm and sat me down. “Listen,” he said, “if you dress like a fool people won’t let you in the door. If you dress like a banker, you can convince people of crazy things.” I didn’t heed this advice for many years. But now I always wear a suit jacket, dress shirt, carry a lawyer’s briefcase and have expensive business cards which I bring to meetings where I’m proposing the most outlandish ideas for interactive art. As the clients start to nod and get excited, I think of grandpa every time!

As people have been sharing their memories of grandpa with me over this past week, oddly, many of them involve being forced by grandpa to eat something they never intended. I remember one morning in New York grandpa offering to make me oatmeal for breakfast. “Terrific!” I said. He brought me a bowl and as I took the first spoonful I froze. It tasted like seawater with bits of oats. I painfully ate the rest of it and resolved never to repeat. This was one of my first insights into how our senses decline as we get older. The next morning grandpa asked again if I would like oatmeal. “No thanks!” I said cheerfully. “How about some cereal?” “Sure,” I said, imagining that would be hard to mess up. Grandpa came out with two gigantic bowls of corn flakes with two cups of cool whip dolloped on top. No milk. I painfully got this down too, but the next morning I slipped out for breakfast at the corner bakery before he awoke.

Grandpa was constantly in action in the 80s and 90s – he started several for-profit and nonprofit companies, many of which had Snibbe in their title (something I’ve learned from him too – as many of you know I recently incorporated Snibbe Interactive, Inc.). He started a company to make films about modern architecture; CIMA – the council of International Modern Architects; a trust to restore the Victorian light posts around Grammercy Park; Landlab, Inc; Snibbes, Inc; Architects for Clinton, and others. When I started to go through grandpa’s effects in earnest five years ago, among the many interesting artifacts are all of the different letterheads he wrote under!

Grandpa’s second wife, Patricia, was, among other things, the designer of all these letterheads and had really turned grandpa’s life around in the 70s. She was a brilliant woman – a graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design, early member of NOW (the National Organization for Women), and incredible intellectual who returned to NYU in the

1990s to study archaeology and matriarchal societies. They even went on an archaeological dig together in England during the early 1990s – their last trip abroad.

Grandpa told me the story of his first date with Pat – he took her out to Max’s Kansas City – a fantastic New York nightclub where the Velvet Underground first became popular. On their first date, in the afternoon, the jazz great Stan Getz was playing a first set to a sparse crowd. During his break, Stan walked by, and, struck by Pat’s beauty, he turned and sat down with them, who were sitting at diagonal corners of a four-top table. They chatted for a bit and it was clear Getz was flirting with Pat. As Getz said goodbye to go back to play, he asked Pat, “How can I get in touch with you?” Without hesitation, grandpa pulled out his wallet, removed a business card and handed it to Stan.

In the late 1990s grandpa’s life shifted to caring for Pat, who had a series of very serious medical problems and heart operations. Ironically, she was even fitted with a heart valve that had been designed by her late father, a medical inventor. This brought out a tender side of grandpa I had never seen before. After Pat’s second stroke in 1998, she underwent an operation which left her with horrendous nerve damage that caused her excruciating pain whenever she was touched anywhere from her upper abdomen to her hips. Every morning for the rest of her life grandpa would wake up and spend a couple of hours washing Pat, covering her with oils, gently wrapping her entire mid-section in cotton, and then helping her to dress.

Because Grandpa’s father had died at fifty, Grandpa felt that he faced imminent death each day of his next forty-one years after turning fifty himself. He went through several health scares, all of which he triumphed magnificently. The most impressive to me was when his doctor told him, after examining his liver, that he would only live another six months unless he quit drinking. Grandpa quit that day and never had another drink for the rest of his life.

Grandpa’s energy never flagged with age. He railed against death. Once he told me “It sucks getting old – all your friends DIE!” When I was looking through his address book a few years ago, nearly every name had the words DEAD prominently written in all caps next to their name.

It’s too much to try and explain all of Grandpa’s movements over the last eight years. In 2003, after Pat had died, grandpa was living in Massachusetts two blocks from my brother. He was still driving every day in his black convertible Volkswagen Cabriolet and swimming three times a week. He was trying to expand his house to add a balcony and “endless pool” which he had read about in the New Yorker. Now, as the controller of his estate, I had to discretely call the builders and engineers he was working with and ask them to please not abide by his requests for major renovations so that we could preserve the small remainder of his estate to take care of him. One time in frustration I told grandpa, “We need this money for your *food* and *medicine*!” “Listen to me,” he said, “we have to build these additions – I need to see the sunset!”

Grandpa had throat cancer around that time – the result of smoking up through the early 1980s. Grandpa underwent an operation and chemotherapy. We only talked about it once, when I asked him if he was scared. “It’s only cancer!” he said to me, and laughed. Grandpa was in the hospital for several months hooked up to respirators and other equipment while Kris and I took turns taking care of him, trying to tell him stories through semi-consciousness. Particularly worrying were the “saturation monitors” which show blood absorption of oxygen. These were sometimes at 60% which doctors warned us could cause permanent brain damage. I can’t even count the number of days that doctors said “This is his last day”. I flew out again and again from California and also brought my dad on the first notice of his imminent death. The doctors requested we approve a tracheotomy to insert a breathing tube, which might remain for the rest of his life. Reflecting on what grandpa would want, we decided that he would rather remain in dignity and live a shorter life, a frightening decision for two young guys to be making.

Kris and I became grandpa’s healthcare proxy and had to frequently make major decisions for him. I remember the doctor taking me aside one day in Massachusetts and asking “Is your grandpa coded?” “Well, actually, he’s usually pretty blunt,” I replied. “No, if he stops breathing should we resuscitate him?” “He’s been pretty clear on that,” I said, “He has a living will and he’s told us, just let me go.” “Let’s ask him,” the doctor replied. We went to his bedside and I asked him, “Grandpa, what should we do if you stop breathing?” “KEEP ME ALIVE AT ANY COST!” He exclaimed.

Amazingly, grandpa recovered and underwent physical therapy, going back to swimming and driving and renovation plans. Soon after that, though, grandpa suffered a stroke which debilitated him and relegated him first to a nursing home and then back to his home with a personal caretaker. The stroke brought out a beautiful, gentle side of grandpa’s personality that remained until his last days. Every meal he immediately offered back to me. Whenever I walked through the door he had a phenomenal smile and the words, “I love you!” As we get old our inhibitions wear off. It was incredible to see that this is what lay inside –pure love and generosity.

I moved grandpa to San Francisco in 2004 after Kris and Bonnie had their first child and Grandpa’s live-in caretaker suddenly died of lung cancer. I was still nervous about asking Grandpa for things – I had asked him many times to let me move him to Cali to receive a resounding “No!”. This time, I tried again, “Grandpa, I’m going to take you to California with me tomorrow. Is that ok?” “That’s fantastic!” he said. The trip was a real adventure, especially trying to help him in the airplane bathroom where my four years of studying yoga had their ultimate test.

Grandpa lived the last three years a few blocks from me. I got to see him once a week, sometimes more, and we went out to a lobster dinner about once a month. I had the chance to introduce him to many of my friends who all adored him. He never failed to say something outrageously funny each time we went out. One time, when leaving the Woodhouse Fish Company on Market Street, he turned to the waitress and said, “Do you mind if I tell you something?” “No, what?” “You have a fantastic body.” I started apologizing to the waitress and she said to me, “You know what, he just made my day.”

Grandpa was the sole English speaker among the fifty Chinese residents at the Mission Bay Convalescent Hospital. This seemed to pose no problem for him. I found grandpa reading Chinese newspapers, watching Bruce Lee movies, and in animated conversations where he spoke English and his friend Mandarin. “What do you think of this place?” I asked grandpa soon after he arrived. “It’s horrible!” he said, with a huge smile. And then he went into detailed plans for renovating and painting the whole place. The four foot Filipino head nurse, Cathy Madrid, told me that grandpa gathered the whole second floor together for a meeting and began, “This place is an architectural disaster. I hereby declare it condemned. The good news is, we have thirty days to correct it and I will be leading the redesign.” He then gave detailed assignments to all the old Chinese men and women gathered around him.

Many times I came to grandpa he asked me, “Where’s Pat?” Each time, for a few months, I would painfully explain that she had died a few years ago. “Oh.” Was all he would say in reply. “Oh yeah.” This became heartbreaking the day I arrived and he handed me a letter to Pat. “Will you please give this to Pat if you see her?” he asked. “Yes, of course.” I said. When I brought it home and opened the letter it was filled over and over with the words “I LOVE YOU. I MISS YOU” in grandpa’s now shaky all-caps architectural writing. From that day forward I decided never to contradict grandpa again.

Grandpa would jump out of bed and exclaim out loud every time I arrived: “Look who’s here!” “Hellooo Scotty!” “I love you!” “Life is fantastic when you’re here!” He was so compassionate and thoughtful. Often, seeing me wiped out and tired at the end of a weekday coming to visit, he’d say, “you’ve got other things to do – you better go”. He’d also continue to offer me his dreadful meals, waving forkfuls of unidentifiable minced meat under my nose.

Grandpa was always asking and talking about Kris and his two sons, who he referred to as Pauly and Johnny. “How are they?” he’d ask. “I love them!” “Paul’s so talented. He’s an incredible painter.”

Grandpa suffered another stroke two months ago and I shed some tears when I saw his condition because I feared I’d never be able to take him out again. He was having trouble seeing on his left side – I had to crawl into the bed and get on his right side for him to recognize me, which he did by grabbing my face with both hands and kissing me. He actually recovered pretty well from this – I was amazed.

Last Saturday Ahna and I came to the nursing home in the late afternoon to take him out for a lobster dinner for his 91st birthday which would have been last Wednesday. He was all dressed up in his LL Bean raincoat and tweed hat. Beautifully trimmed beard, aggressively trimmed eyebrows (if you know a Snibbe, you know what I’m talking about). He was exuberant with love – “I love you!” he exclaimed to me and then to Ahna. He had a lot of attention for her that day. “You are a beautiful woman!” he said to her “And, you’re a lucky man!”

Grandpa got up and was walking in his walker for the first time in weeks. I was amazed to see him mobile again. But when we got to the elevator he refused to enter. "I'm not going in that elevator!" "Do you want to eat lobster?" "Of course!" "Well, it's through that elevator." "Then I'm not going." Nothing that I said could convince him and we went back to his room. He collapsed into bed – just the walk down the hall was a lot for him. I held his hand as he fell asleep and whispered "I love you" into his ear as we got up to go back home.

At eight in the morning the next day the phone rang. I was still in bed and Ahna answered it. She came running, crying with the phone and said, "Your grandpa died!" I got on the phone and Cathy Madrid, the head nurse said to me, "I'm sorry to inform you that your grandpa passed away this morning". I asked her to please leave his body undisturbed and let us come and be with him. We got there a few minutes later and sat in his room with him for two hours. We meditated, said a number of prayers and talked about his beautiful life and personality. It was a profoundly moving experience – I had the sense that he was still there at that moment and there was a sense of transcendence and power. The beauty and all the good of his life washed through the room and I felt confident that his next state would be good.

The people of Mission Bay Convalescent Hospital treated Grandpa with phenomenal care over the last three years. I have seen what true compassion is from Cathy and the staff there. We would all be so lucky to spend our last years in such a love-filled place, despite the mystery meat and mauve curtains. Grandpa, the other residents and the staff at Mission Bay have taught me that we leave this life with nothing but the kindness we've shared with others. I think grandpa realized this profoundly in his last years – he lost everything yet was happier and more loving than ever! Grandpa's last years make me wish that we could all infuse our lives more with this concern, to really focus on loving and benefitting each other and put worldly goals in their rightful place as a means to an end for spreading love and compassion.