

The Life of

Ron Linsky



Part One

Ron Linsky lived an amazing life. He was a “bio-politician” and a self-taught oceanographer. He had traveled around the world and under the seas. He had a story for everything.

You always learned something from Ron — he was a fount of knowledge, no matter what the topic. He’d even draw you a picture upside down to help illustrate his point, if needed!

A modest man, Ron didn’t brag about his accomplishments. He’d drop hints, but only if it pertained to something he was telling you. Consequently, not many people knew what he was like — and what he had done — outside of NWRI.

We wanted to share his remarkable story. It’s a compilation of interviews, newspaper articles, old resumes, personal letters, and a short autobiography that Ron once wrote about himself. We think you’ll be surprised by the man you meet here. We were, and we worked with him everyday.

Uptown Ron

Ronald Benjamin Linsky was born in the middle of the Great Depression on June 16, 1934, in Los Angeles, California. His father, Walter, was a Polish immigrant who spoke seven languages and had a flair for storytelling. Ron once described his father as a man who could talk to anyone anytime and make them feel good about themselves. That trait must have rubbed off, because that’s how many felt about Ron as well.

His mother, Helen, was an aficionado of the opera and ballet. It was through her that Ron developed a passion for music. As a child, he learned to play the piano and, as an adult, he loved to listen to classical music (especially while sitting outside in his garden, bird book and binoculars in hand). Some of his friends and colleagues might remember how he would catch the attention of a



crowded room by singing. He wasn’t shy at all about his musical inclinations.

Ron grew up in what is now South Central Los Angeles. NWRI Board Member Norman Eckenrode, who was raised in nearby Watts, fondly remembered that he and Ron used to have an ongoing joke about their modest beginnings: Norm would teasingly call him “Uptown Ron” while Ron would call him “Downtown Norm.”

Did You Know?

One of Ron’s secret desires in life was to conduct an orchestra. The other was to be a matador in a bullring — challenging a small bull.

Life during that time period, however, wasn’t easy for anybody. According to Ron’s childhood friend, Mike Punaro, “Those were the days of 50-cent double features with Tom & Jerry cartoons, Flash Gordon serials, and *Movietone Newsreels* featuring President Franklin D. Roosevelt speaking about the war effort. It was a time when ‘The Greatest Generation’ went off to Europe and the Pacific to protect our shores, and there was rationing of meat, sugar, and gasoline.”

World War II affected Ron all throughout his younger years, starting in elementary school. In the sixth grade, he was chosen along with three other students to run an agriculture program at his elementary

school to raise food for the cafeteria during the war years. In addition to caring for a vegetable garden, he also helped raise cows, sheep, and chickens, which meant he had to be at school early and stay late, plus work on the weekends. Even as a child, he threw himself into his job.

His efforts paid off in an unusual way: “Ronnie became a radio celebrity,” said Punaro. Because of his work with the agricultural program, Ron was selected to attend the Art Linkletter House Party radio broadcast, which aired at noon every weekday. It was a huge honor, recalled Punaro, “and all the other students in the school went to the auditorium that day to hear the broadcast.”

No doubt, this was Ron’s first moment in the limelight. It certainly wouldn’t be his last.

From High School to Spy School

Growing up, Ron had a lot of hobbies and interests. For one, he was an avid reader, and Rudyard Kipling was his favorite poet and author. He also kept a growing autograph collection (he lived next to Hollywood, after all) and took up flying on the weekends in small commuter planes with his neighbor, a pilot. It was from this experience that he developed a life-long love of airplanes. In his later years, he collected models of airplanes that he had actually traveled on — his office at NWRI was filled with them.

Papa Linsky...

One of Ron’s greatest joys in life was his grandchildren, and he was lucky enough to see two of his grandsons on a weekly basis. Red-headed Jake, now 8, was the athlete while little Evan, only 4 and a half, shared Ron’s love for dinosaurs, birds, bugs, and all sorts of animals.

“Papa,” as the boys called Ron, loved to watch Jake’s team sports. Together, they’d also go to *Mighty Ducks* hockey games at the Pond, see the *Angels* at bat, or scream “Fight on!” at USC football games. At home, however, Ron would always take the boys into the garden. He’d say to his son, Bryan Linsky, “I’m going to teach your kids to cuss and spit and get dirty and be boys.”

Of course, the garden was Ron’s private Eden. He could spend all day outside pruning and tending his plants, especially his bonsai trees. The boys could be boys, but there was no messing with the flowers!



Life Imitates Art...

Ron loved to read: mysteries and Clive Cussler action novels were favorites. But Rudyard Kipling was his literary hero. Amazingly, if you compare Ron's adventures in life to Kipling's action-adventures, you'd see a lot of similarities. Kipling wrote about exotic locales in the *Jungle Book* and *Just So Stories for Children* – Ron once lived and worked in tropical jungles, and was no stranger to traveling to far-away places like India, China, and the South Pacific. Kipling's works celebrated the common soldier, and one novel was even about a spy. Ron loved his time spent in Okinawa, where he was stationed as an army "spy" in his youth. Kipling also wrote seafaring tales like *Captains Courageous*, and his famous poem, *Gunga Din*, was about the most important soldier in battle – the one who carried the drinking water. In the battle against waterborne disease and drought, Ron, too, was a soldier, fighting hard to ensure there was safe, clean water for all. In a world where life sometimes imitates art, Kipling must have made a huge impression on Ron as a child – or else Ron simply recognized a kindred spirit.

Both Ron and his older brother, Walter, were athletic in high school. However, all it took was for people to ask Ron "Why don't you play football like your brother?" to keep him from playing the sport. Ron wasn't a follower – he was his own person. So he played baseball and basketball instead (he was 6'1"). Still, he loved to learn, and his favorite subjects were science and history.

The Collector's Eye...

Ron was an avid collector. Coins, Chinese teapots, Chevron cars, and artwork from around the world were among his many interests. He also loved Hawaiian shirts – in fact, he owned over 75 of them. But his favorite collector's items were stamps, which satisfied his love for history and geography. "Ron was a big-time philatelist, specializing in stamps from Australia, New Zealand, and England," said his wife, Patricia. "Often, the first place that we would stop at when we traveled overseas was the Post Office!"

After graduating from high school in 1952, Ron decided to go to college. At first, he didn't quite know what he wanted to do in life. His original plan was to be a dentist, but he realized it just wasn't the career for him. Then a professor of his at the University of Southern California (USC) suggested he study biology.

"Ron was a very curious person, and biology appealed to him because it was about the relationships between man and the world," said his wife of 26 years, Patricia Linsky.

Schooling, however, was put on a hold when Ron volunteered to join the army. He spent the next 21 months as a private in the Army Security Agency and learned to speak and write Russian at "spy school."



After completing basic training in Ft. Devins, Massachusetts, Ron was assigned to a base in Okinawa, Japan, where he interpreted messages as a "Teletype Interceptor." He ended up being discharged for medical purposes after coming down with appendicitis, though he completed his 8-year service through the army reserve.

Said his wife, Patricia, "At the time of his discharge, Ron couldn't divulge what he did, though he liked to say he was a spy. He loved being in the army."

Bats on the Brain

When Ron returned to USC, he continued his studies in biology, earning both his B.S. and M.S. degrees at the same time. He worked odd jobs to support his way through school, from working in a grocery store, where he cut up cheese, to earning a scholarship as a

Teacher's Assistant in Anatomy, where he cut up cats instead. He was also given the opportunity to conduct research abroad. His choices were to either study whales in the Arctic (where it was cold) or to study rabid bats in

the tropics (where it was warm). Warm won. In 1961, he spent 3 months in the jungles of Costa Rica on an NSF-sponsored expedition investigating the origin and distribution of rabies virus in Central American bats. Armed with a butterfly net, camera, and gun, he helped capture nearly 1,000 bats, which ranged from 25 different species, for research purposes. One vampire bat had a 48-inch wingspan and teeth a fourth of an inch long!

Probably the scariest moment on the expedition was when the research team members discovered via official letter that the rabies vaccine they'd

taken to prevent contracting the fatal disease had only been effective for one person – lucky Ron Linsky. They didn't receive this crucial warning until after they'd been handling the rabid bats for some time.

Ron loved his experience in Costa Rica and hoped to return



there soon. This was not to be, however, because once he graduated from USC in 1962, he immediately was hired as a science teacher at Westminster High School in Westminster, California.

As a teacher, he was known for his love of playing chess and sharing slides of Costa Rica. He once told a student reporter that he

became a teacher to "transfer his excitement to his students," and he was responsible for more than one ingenious idea to make school an exciting place.

Most, if not all, of these ideas revolved around helping

students to better appreciate science and research. For one, he was advisor of BRAINS, a club that arranged lectures by scientists – like the project director of the U.S. Mars probe – to encourage an interest in science.

He also spearheaded a project in which students, divided into groups, conducted science experiments in an area of interest to

A Whale of a Tale...

Ron may have passed up an opportunity to study whales as a grad student, but that didn't mean he didn't love these leviathans of the deep. In 1983, he published a short book about whales entitled *The Whale's Way* as part of his small business, *Things Marine*.

them. No tests were given throughout the school year, but each group was required to give a periodic review to other classmates on the experiments they had been conducting. Grades were determined by the class after the review. In many ways, it's exactly what NWRI's principal investigators do nowadays when they are granted research project

funding and must provide periodic reviews to the NWRI Research Advisory Board!

Ron's best idea, however, was yet to come. It started with a summer school course in marine biology and exploded into a career-altering venture into oceanography.

Mini Marine Biologists

In 1963, Ron decided to try something new. He offered to teach a summer school class in marine biology. At the time, it was the only class of its kind in the county, as well as the only class offered to regular high school students in Southern California (meaning, it wasn't restricted to honors students).

Forty-four students attended the first class. One of those students was Kris Lindstrom, who ended up becoming the very first member of NWRI's Research Advisory Board years later.

"I was anticipating a career as a marine biologist," recalled Lindstrom, "and my mother was willing to drive me to summer school some 15 miles away and make the two trips a day to give me this opportunity. Taking Ron's class launched my education in marine sciences and started a life-long friendship that provided numerous opportunities to collaborate on projects and share our ideas and enthusiasm for life, travel, stamps, investing, and furthering the concept of the value of water."

As part of the marine biology class, students set out as early as 4 a.m. to attend various field trips, including places like local tide pools or the Scripps Institute of Oceanography in La Jolla, California. They used nets, specimen jars,



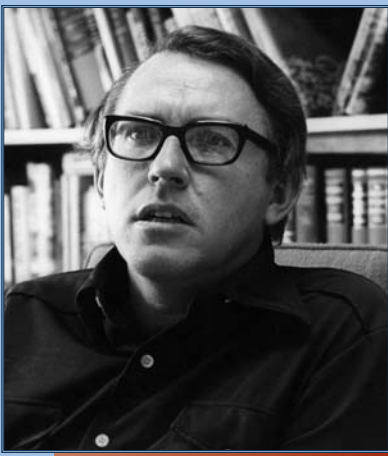
and other equipment to collect flora and fauna along the coast. The community helped out, too, by donating marine specimens to the students, including 500 specimens from one man alone in Huntington Beach. In fact, Ron's students collected so many specimens

School Ties...

Ron's first principal at Westminster High School was a man named Paul Berger. They remained close friends throughout the years and, over the last decade, Ron acted as Paul's campaign manager for the position of Trustee at Orange Coast Community College in Orange County, California.

that some were later donated to the University of California, Irvine (UCI) — a new campus at the time — to jumpstart its museum collection.

The excitement for this summer school class began to build momentum. So did Ron's status at the school district. Over a 5-year period, he went from biology teacher to Chairman of the Science Department at Westminster and Fountain



Valley High Schools, as well as President of the District Education Association in the Huntington Beach Union High School District. He also became a research assistant at UCI, working in Back Bay Newport, and served on the Accrediting Commission for the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, which was considered an honor.

In his last year with the district, he was even asked to organize and open the science department of a new high school.

Then, in 1967, he was offered a job that changed his life forever. He became the Coordinator of Marine Sciences for the Orange County Department of Education in Santa Ana, California. That's when he conceived the idea for the Floating Laboratory Program, a federally funded project that drew thousands of landlubbers to the sea to learn hands-on marine science.

All Aboard the Floating Lab

Its catchy theme was "Think Wet!" Its purpose was to allow children to actively participate in real marine science — which meant they went to school at sea.

In fact, it was Ron's hope that the Floating Lab would give children a positive

A Tale of Two 'Biologists...

Lifelong friends, Ron Linsky and Kris Lindstrom first met when Lindstrom, then a teenager, enrolled in Ron's summer school class in marine biology. "Ron and I really hit it off that summer," said Lindstrom, "and we ended up playing a lot of chess and drinking hot chocolate together on class breaks."

After class, they'd sometimes hop into Ron's Volkswagen bug to go on mini field trips to collect and observe marine specimens. Other times, they'd hunt bats — Ron's favorite. "Ron taught me the benefits of keeping field notes," said Lindstrom, who still has all his notes from that summer class filed away in neat, detailed journals. "He treated me like a real researcher, even though I was only a kid."

Their mutual love of marine science kept their friendship strong even after Lindstrom completed Ron's class. A few years later, when Lindstrom was an undergraduate at UCI, he came to Ron for a summer job on the Floating Lab.

It was on the Floating Lab that they started catching fish with tumors. Ron and Lindstrom began a letter-writing campaign to local congressmen and the Regional Water Quality Control Board about their concerns regarding a possible connection between diseased fish and the Orange County Sanitation District's nearby ocean outfall. Then, Ron helped put together evidence and presented it at congressional hearings in Orange County, which resulted in an investigation. "The congressional hearing was a big story in 1969," said Lindstrom. "It was front page news in the Los Angeles Times."

The end result of the hearing? Ron was appointed to the Regional Water Quality Control Board, Santa Ana Region, by California Governor Ronald Reagan and soon after become Director of Sea Grant at USC while Lindstrom, only 22 at the time, was hired by the Sanitation District to work in their new marine bio-assay lab to determine if sewage effluent was toxic to marine life (Lindstrom, who worked there for 4 years and has been a consultant ever since, reported good news: no specific link was ever made regarding any cause-and-effect relationship at the outfall). As for the Sanitation District — it was among the founding members of NWRI many years later!

"It was the beginning of Ron's life-long mission to protect water quality," said Lindstrom.

appreciation of the marine environment and show them that science can be an exciting experience.

The lab itself was a 65-foot former sports fishing vessel converted for scientific investigation. It would set out from Newport Beach each morning with a boatload of students who, throughout the day, would haul aboard a trawl net teeming with squirming, slippery specimens to the chant of "heave ho," learn the rudiments of navigation (such as interpreting radar and plotting the boat's position), and test seawater quality conditions.

It truly was a hands-on experience. Students manned the boat and handled sea life, and often came home tired and smelling fishy. But many couldn't resist offering to volunteer working on the boat during the summer!

What started in 1967 as a small pilot program financed by the U.S. Department of



Education soon skyrocketed into a major educational attraction. Twenty school districts took part in the Floating Lab program its first year of operation — and, of these, 11 added marine science classes to their permanent curriculum. In just 3 years, over 32,000 students and

their teachers had gone to sea with the Floating Lab, which by now had been featured on a national television program and numerous newspaper articles. It even expanded to include extended classes — including a weekend study session on nearby Catalina Island and short cruises through the Channel Islands — for college students.

At the time, there was no other program like it in the world.

interesting than the moon's behind." He said that space exploration was receiving more federal funding and had more pages in school textbooks devoted to it than the oceans did — even though water makes up 71 percent of the earth's surface. It was a discrepancy he wanted to see reversed.

That same year, he spent one month in Mexico City as a lecturer and consultant at the invitation of the Mexican Government to help develop marine science programs within the Mexican educational system. As part of that effort, he was the first North American educator to be invited to the *Congreso Nacional de Oceanografica*, where he conducted a 2-day workshop in oceanography for 1,200 selected educators, technicians, and scientists throughout Mexico.

At this point, he was becoming more and more recognized as an expert oceanographer. Though he'd had no formal training in the field, it didn't stop him from holding marine-science workshops at the University of California system or serving as an advisor to the Fullerton Junior College Oceanographic Technology Program. Nor did it prevent him from being appointed Vice President of Educational Affairs for both the American Society for Oceanography and National Oceanographic Association.

He could even be found at student career days throughout the state, giving advice to teenagers on becoming oceanographers.

Perhaps the most telling sign that he'd made it to the top as an oceanographer was when he began working with Jacques Cousteau, the most famous oceanographer in the world. Originally, Ron was hired by Doubleday Multi-Media, Inc. to edit, re-script, develop, and market educational resource

A Labor of Love...

Ron was principal advisor and co-founder of the Marine Studies Institute (MSI) at Dana Point Harbor in California, a one-of-its-kind multi-million dollar education center meant to promote an appreciation of the marine environment and create a new generation of oceanographers.

MSI was intended to be available to students all over Southern California, and was to feature classrooms, labs, an auditorium, and an aquarium, as well as include activities like whale watching. In addition, it was to be a permanent base for the Floating Lab program.

Ron's former student, Kris Lindstrom, attended MSI's groundbreaking ceremony. He said the highlight of the day was meeting the man behind the voice of Tony the Tiger, a celebrity who Ron would often invite to help out with fundraising efforts.

Ron was asked to be Director of MSI back in 1968, but complications soon postponed its establishment (its construction was slated for completion in 1975). Though Ron moved on to directing the Sea Grant programs at USC and the University of Hawaii, his interest in MSI never wavered.

When he returned to California in the late 1970s, one of the first things he did was volunteer his time to help finalize the institute. His efforts paid off when it opened its doors to the public as the Dana Point Ocean Institute. It's been educating youngsters ever since!

The Linsky Motto...

Ron's oldest son, Bryan, spent three summers in a row at sea with him on the Floating Lab.

"It was a special time for me," recalled Bryan. "I'd spend weeks with my dad out there on the boat. I was only a young boy then, but I worked for him, and we got to travel up the Channel Islands on the California coast together."

"One of the things I liked most about my dad," said Bryan, "was that he never criticized anyone taking a chance. He'd say that sometimes in life, you needed to get on the horse and take a ride. It didn't matter what it was as long as you were passionate about it."

And, if it didn't work out, then you simply followed the Linsky motto: when things get rough, pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and start all over again.

The Self-Taught Oceanographer

And, at the time, oceanography — the study of the sea — was a relatively new field. It was also a field that Ron was beginning to make a name for himself.

By day, he was Director of the Floating Lab Program for the Orange County Department of Education, working hard to encourage children to appreciate the ocean. At night, he began lecturing at various local colleges and libraries to spread the word on topics like marine mammals or ocean pollution. But that wasn't all he did.

In 1969, he appeared at a 2-day State Marine Science Convention in Florida to point out that "the ocean's bottom is more

materials for *The Undersea World of J.Y. Cousteau* film series. According to his wife, Patricia, Ron would sit in his living room for hours and manually splice pieces of Cousteau's films together.

Ron's former student, Kris Lindstrom, remembered that "Ron met with Cousteau a lot. They connected because they both loved the ocean."

Once again, all of Ron's hard work and enthusiasm soon paid off. His beloved alma mater approached him with an offer he couldn't refuse — overseeing the brand-new Sea Grant program at USC.



Look out for Part Two of Ron's biography in the Winter newsletter, which will encompass his years as a Director of Sea Grant at two universities, his 3-year stint living in Trinidad, and his escapades in Sri Lanka and the Philippines ... not to mention the one time he lectured the Thai Royal Family.

Move Over, Jacques Cousteau...

In 1971, Ron received the Premi Tridente d'Ora from Italy for outstanding contributions in the field of Oceanography. Previous winners included Jacques Cousteau and Harold Edgerton. Ron, who was 37 years old at the time, accepted the award at the Ustica Oceanographic Institution in Italy, and stayed one month touring the country as a guest of the Italian Government to consult on marine resources development in the Mediterranean.

