



N. Donald Rees
1937 – 2025

Norton Donald Rees, widely regarded as an unconventional, fearless, determined and visionary educational leader, passed away peacefully at his home in Palm Desert, CA, on January 2, 2025, at nearly 88 years of age.

Born to Ruth Roberta Knight and William Norton Rees on January 27, 1937, in Lynwood, CA, Donald was raised by a single mother in a working-class neighborhood of Los Angeles where he learned at an early age to value experiences over possessions. And while still a teenager, he developed a lifelong love of the mountains and mountain sports. When his friends worked summer jobs to buy cars, he saved his money for a months-long solo trip to Europe, inspired by his history studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Shortly after marrying his college sweetheart, Jo Ann Hunt, Donald embarked on a new adventure and moved his growing family to Lugano, Switzerland. There, he taught at the American School and spent as much time as possible in the nearby Alps. The family's time in Switzerland was integrated into Donald's teaching career in California, where he taught math at the Polytechnic School in Pasadena and the Laguna Blanca School in Santa Barbara. Earlier, Donald and Jo Ann were teaching colleagues in California's Buellton Union School District.

Donald's passion for the outdoors and dedication to education led him to found two institutions that continue to thrive today. In 1971, inspired by a family backpacking trip to Yosemite, he established the **Yosemite Institute** (now NatureBridge), a program that has introduced more than 1.6 million students to outdoor education and the wonders of nature. In 1978, he founded **Squaw Valley Academy** (now Lake Tahoe Preparatory School), where he served as Head of School for nearly 40 years. He took immense pride in the school's 100% college acceptance rate, reflecting his belief in the power of strong academics, personal growth and outdoor athletics.

A voracious reader, lifelong learner, international traveler and avid skier and bicyclist, Donald continued to value experiences, both good and bad. Even after a long stay at a skilled nursing facility for a broken ankle, he declared, "It was an experience, just like crossing the Atlantic on the Queen Mary. They are both experiences."

Donald is survived by his children, Christopher Rees (Jessica), Carol Rees (John Foley), and Ann Rees McGreevy (Ali Samgiss); his grandchildren, Linden McGreevy and Jared McGreevy; and his sisters, Roberta Hoole (Richard) and Nancy Bormann. He was predeceased by his beloved wife, Jo Ann, in 1992.

The family extends heartfelt gratitude to Cherry Brewer and Serg Ramirez, whose extraordinary care and devotion over the last six months of Donald's life were beyond compare. Their kindness and compassion will never be forgotten.

Donald Rees lived a long, full and accomplished life marked by adventure, passion for education, and a remarkable love of the natural world. His legacy continues to inspire generations of students and educators alike. In his words, "We're all short tenants on this planet, so get out and do something."

A private family gathering is planned for January 27, 2025, to coincide with Donald's 88th birthday. For donations, please consider supporting [NatureBridge](#) or any organization of your choice.

[NatureBridge Blog Honoring Donald Rees Visionary Founder 1-9-2025](#)