



Michael J. Briggs

MADISON—Michael J. Briggs, of Madison, Wis., died unexpectedly and peacefully on August 26, 2019, at the age of 84.

Mike was born in the town of Holt, in the county of Norfolk, England, on Sept. 1, 1934. His mother Sybil was from Holt, and his father John was a baker, originally from Lincolnshire. Mike's early education was at local state schools, but at 10 he transferred to Gresham's School on a scholarship offered to the sons of the merchants of the town. Mike attended the University of Exeter, where he met his future wife Norma, who was from London. Both were English majors. They wed on June 30, 1956.

In 1958, Mike and Norma immigrated to the U.S. and went to graduate school at UNC-Chapel Hill. Their three daughters were born in Durham. In 1962, the family moved to Lagos, Nigeria, where Mike worked on a Ford Foundation grant to help set up a national library. In 1966, the family moved to Madison, and shortly after arriving there,

Mike and Norma had a son and fostered a son. Mike worked as an African Studies bibliographer at the UW, and Norma became involved in the feminist movement. Mike and Norma later became lifelong members of Prairie Unitarian Church.

Mike graduated from UW-Madison law school in 1975. He worked as a parole and probation administrative law judge, and also served three terms as a Madison City Council Alderman. Norma also went to law school and graduated in 1984. When Mike retired as an ALJ, he joined Norma in her private practice.

In 1999, Mike and Norma moved to Oregon, Wis. Norma designed the house, and transformed their 10 acres of land into an amazing garden. They were avid Scottish Country Dancers for decades. Norma died in April 2015, and Mike moved to the Capitol Lakes retirement community in downtown Madison. He continued to practice law pro bono, and focused on assisting his neighbors with estate planning. Mike also remained active in progressive politics.

Mike had a lifelong love of music, which he shared with many. As a boy, he played church organ, piano and sang in choir, and he later took up the guitar, banjo, concertina and accordion. Mike was a versatile musician, composing originals and arranging standards. He played and sang rousing labor and antiwar songs, and was a member of English and Scottish Country dance bands. In his later years, Mike was a peripatetic accordion player, who nicknamed himself "Grandpa Squeezebox."

Mike was also gifted at language, with a command of many tongues and a love for the dialect of his native Norfolk. He had a wonderful sense of humor, boundless compassion and intellect, and regaled many with his quick, wry wit. Shortly before his passing, he shared this joke: "What is perfect pitch? That's when you throw an accordion and it lands in a dumpster full of banjos."

Mike will be deeply missed. He was preceded in death by his wife, Norma; and son-in-law, Andy. He is survived by his daughters, Carolyn (Becca), Helen (Jon), and Marian (Kevin); son, John (Lena), foster son, Chukwuma (Cindy); and brother, Colin (Shirley). Mike is also survived by five grandchildren, Alison, Kelsey, Emma, Tatum and Cade; and one great-grandchild Adelynn.

A celebration of Mike's life is planned for October 2019. Please email celebratingmikebriggs@gmail.com for details.

Notes about the celebration from Mary Mullen

The celebration of Mike's life was held at First Unitarian Society of Madison's Landmark Auditorium on October 20, 2019, from 3:00-7:00 p.m. with

- group singing led by Patricia Stone with accordion
- sharing of personal memories facilitated by Rick Rueking and John Briggs
- refreshments and mingling
- Scottish dancing
- a choir number by the Prairie UU Society choir - "When the Spirit Says Do"
- several numbers played by Dark of the Moon Contra-Band members Mary Mullen, Bonnie Gruber, and Inna Larsen (Mike played with this band when his wife Norma called dances, and
- group singing led by Mary Mullen, Barbara Park, Jeff Laurence, and another accordion player.