

# *On the Path*

## *In Memory of Dr. Loren Kreck*

By Keith Hammer

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As a young adult I did not know Loren Kreck, but our life paths would soon cross and for that I am forever grateful. Dr. Loren Kreck passed away at the age of 89 on March 26, leaving us all a legacy of improved human health and wildland conservation in northwest Montana.

While still in high school, I remember seeing photos in local newspapers of deer whose teeth were diseased from the excessive fluoride being spewed from the aluminum plant in Columbia Falls. Local residents were being warned about eating vegetables from their gardens near the plant. A class-action lawsuit was brought against the aluminum plant by Columbia Falls dentist Dr. Loren Kreck and his wife Mary.

The plant reduced its fluoride emissions from 10,000 to 861 pounds per day, but the Krecks endured years of "To Heck with Kreck" bumper stickers for their stance on environmental issues. Ironically, an aluminum plant spokesman in 1999 credited the reduction in emissions for allowing the plant to remain competitive and open for several more decades as plants elsewhere were shuttered due to poor economic conditions.

During my college summers in the early 1970's, I worked maintaining trails for the Forest Service in the newly designated Jewel Basin Hiking Area and what would soon become the Great Bear Wilderness. I didn't know at the time that Loren and his sister had made a film about Jewel Basin and helped get the high alpine area protected from road building, logging and motorized vehicles. Nor that Loren was a key figure in securing a congressional designation of Wilderness for the mountains that lay along the Middle Fork Flathead River between the Bob Marshall Wilderness and Glacier National Park – the Great Bear.

After my post-college experiences in logging convinced me to work for better forest conservation and expanded wilderness protection, it was not surprising that I met Loren in 1984. I of course found in him a dedicated ally in protecting the Swan Range. What I had not expected, however, was the depth of our friendship and the many outings we'd share in the sheer joy of his love for the outdoors. Over the years we would hike, ski, kayak, and canoe together. Loren became my mentor not only in all things conservation, but as a truly marvelous human being.

Loren was a naturally gifted storyteller. His sense of humor and love of practical jokes kept us all in stitches, but all stories came round in one way or another to conveying Loren's great warmth of heart and character. These included stories of Loren's World War II service flying Corsair fighters off the deck of the USS Bennington – a flight deck from which Loren also attempted to troll for fish with a fishing pole he'd brought onboard in his duffle.

Loren's concern for human health and his concern for the health of our surrounding air, mountains and rivers were one and the same. He made great personal sacrifice to

conserve our public lands for future generations and recently donated an easement through his riverfront property for a trail that now connects the “Old Red Bridge” to the upstream town of Columbia Falls.

Loren shunned a lavish lifestyle and instead gave all that he could to help other people and conserve a healthy environment. His hopes for the trail by his house were simple: “I believe in public access. I wanted to leave something for future generations to enjoy. I hope people will be able to come down to the river and fish, or swim, or just enjoy this beautiful place.”

Loren’s wife Mary shared in his conservation work and outdoor adventures until her death in 1998. Loren played in his first hockey tournament at age 68 and was still skating at age 86. In a 2006 letter to the Bigfork Eagle, Loren wrote “I am 85 years old. My lady companion, Val, is 84 . . . we both still ski and hike, although not as fast as we once did . . . Nature is as close as we can come to a magical ‘fountain of youth.’ One thing that will keep you young; walking and skiing on our blessed trails – getting away from the noise and pollution of machines.”

A community potluck celebration of Loren’s life is planned for 3pm, Saturday, April 17 at the Whitefish Ice Rink and Saddle Club, 725 Wisconsin Avenue, along the way to Big Mountain.

Loren influenced my life before I ever met him, was a friend and mentor for over a quarter century, and is sorely missed. But he is with each of us whenever we take an outing into Jewel Basin, the Great Bear Wilderness, along the Flathead River, or elsewhere in the great outdoors he called “unendingly beautiful.”

Loren is off blazing trail on the other side of the mountain. The rest of us will just have to catch up when we can.

*Keith Hammer grew up hiking, skiing, camping, hunting, and fishing in the Swan Mountains. He has worked a number of jobs, from Forest Service trail worker to logger to backcountry guide, and currently works as an environmental consultant and head of the nonprofit Swan View Coalition. His column appears regularly in this paper and is archived at [www.swanrange.org](http://www.swanrange.org). Keith can be reached at 406-755-1379 or [keith@swanview.org](mailto:keith@swanview.org).*



Loren Kreck in the great outdoors in 1998. Steve Thompson photo.