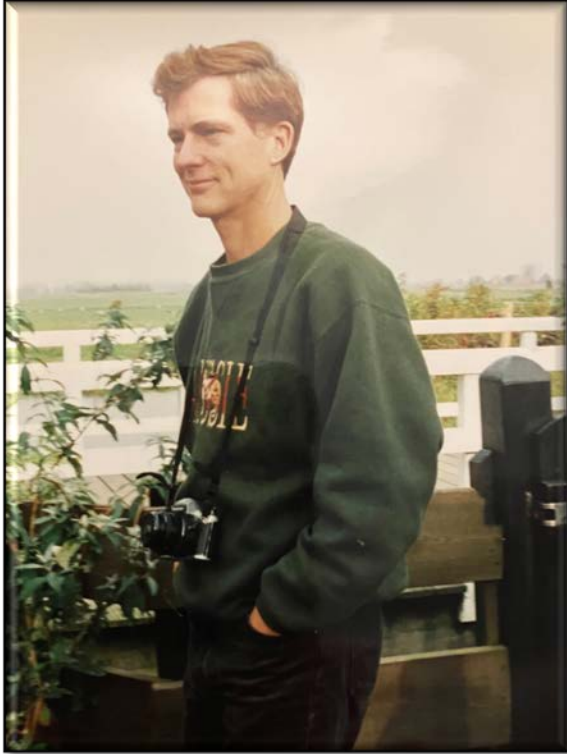


# Leland Kent Perry

October 2, 1953 – January 3, 2023



"Zany humor."

"A smile that would melt your heart."

"A bright, shining light."

"My beloved friend. I love you more than you'll ever know."

"Wonderful human."

"He really was magical."

"He was loved by many people...such a great and caring person."

"One of the nicest people I've known."

"So kind."

"One of a kind. Kind, fun, funny, sweet. A class act of a guy."

"Will always remember him."

"I loved every second with them. A gem of a person."

"We will all miss his charm and sweet wit."

"A very special person he was... such a kind and gentle nature."

"Amazing human being! Kind, sweet, always smiling and laughing, and making the best out of every moment with his dogs. The world lost a wonderful guy."

"He touched so many people."

"Truly one of those souls that was a bright light for everyone."

"The kindest, purest soul."

"The best guy for smiles, laughter and comic relief. You were and always will be one of my favorite people."

When Leland died on January 3, 2023, many of his friends in the dog world poured their comments onto various websites. The comments all said the same thing. This quiet, unassuming fellow was universally loved for his humility, approachability, humor, zest for dogs and people, and his spreading of good cheer.

We shared 35 years of our lives. I never saw anyone get angry at him and I never ever saw him get hostile with another person. We never had a real argument during all those years. We never once went to bed at night upset with each other and, yes, he was always humble, unassuming, self-effacing, and, yet, determined. He was easy to like.

Leland was born in 1953 in Arlington, Virginia, as the fifth of seven children. He grew up with three brothers and three sisters and with fond memories of his childhood. His father was a government engineer in Washington, D.C. Starting during the Eisenhower years, when the Interstate Highway System was being developed, his father was in charge of the numbering system, working with other agencies, and reworking the prior numbering system to create a trans-national freeway grid. His mother was a homemaker who did missionary work in Africa, taught Sunday School, and raised seven kids.

Over the years, the family moved several times within Virginia, eventually settling in Hallieford, a small unincorporated community in rural Virginia on the western shore of Chesapeake Bay.

His family stayed unusually close, even as they spread across the East and West Coasts. They kept in touch with each other, had frequent reunions, and genuinely enjoyed each other's company. Although Leland was at first shy in group settings, he valued his free-flowing interactions with all his sibs. (Remarkably, all of his six siblings, aged 62 to 81, are living – Leland was the first of his generation to go.)

By age 4 or 5, Leland showed a love of nature and all living creatures. He was shy and introspective, but charmed by the beauty of flowers and trees and already pursued his inquisitive interests. The family lived in a developing neighborhood that allowed a short walk to undeveloped areas where he could explore all these objects of allure. Frogs were an early enthrallment as he initially watched their behavior studiously and learned how to anticipate their jumping. He enjoyed exploring nature and digging things up. He was not above catching and releasing frogs and his enchantment with living beings continued to grow.

Leland left home to go off to college, first attending Northern Virginia Community College, but then graduating as a biology major from George Mason University in Fairfax just outside of Washington, D.C. He worked for some years at a commercial firm doing biotech (as we would call it now), eventually deciding to leave the company because he didn't like the chemical exposures.

He then took a position at the National Institutes of Health in the laboratories of the legendary Roscoe Brady, a Lasker Award winner who ran the Metabolic Neurology Branch of the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke. The laboratory discovered the enzyme systems for the biosynthesis of long chain fatty acids and also described the enzymatic defects in a series of inherited metabolic diseases involving disorders of lipid storage such as Tay-Sachs and Gaucher's disease. They also developed the first enzyme replacement therapy in medicine.

Leland's role was as the technologist for this laboratory. Unlike a medical technician, a "technologist" at NIH was the person in charge of laboratory methods in Dr. Brady's laboratory. He helped develop and refine the new methods, taught the advanced methods to the scientists in the laboratory, and maintained the quality and uniformity of scientific experimentation in the lab. In this role Leland was a co-author of first reports on the successful transfer and expression of human DNA (for a glucocerebrosidase enzyme essential for the correction of Gaucher's disease) by repopulating the human DNA in the hematopoietic stem cells of a different organism which could then synthesize the corrected human enzyme, a crucial technical step in the development of gene therapy in humans.



**The Perry 7**  
Clockwise From Top Left:  
Gregory, Elston, Leland,  
Elizabeth, Toby, Candy, and Buddy.

Leland and I met in Washington, D.C. in 1987 when I was there for a committee meeting at the American Psychiatric Association. It's a unique story. We met in the gay bar frequented by professionals from the State Department. It was about three weeks after he broke up with his boyfriend of 7 years. He was 34 and I was 41. I saw him from across the room and immediately my eyes fixed on him. It's hard to say how I intuited this, but he looked so intelligent, grounded, comfortably self-possessed, natural (not posing), handsome, and approachable.

As soon as I saw him, I started walking over to him, quickly, because I figured someone else would get to him first. I saddled up beside him and looked in his direction, but he seemingly didn't notice that I was there, so I leaned over and yelled (it was incredibly noisy) something in his direction. His head didn't even turn. I assumed he saw me coming and that he wasn't interested, but I decided that wasn't certain, so after maybe 15 seconds of hesitating, I leaned over again and yelled something louder. This time, his head turned partially in my direction, probably enough to see me out of the corner of his eye, and then he turned away again, looking off in the distance. I figured that was that, but I also figured this guy seems really worthwhile and I wanted to try to make it happen. I was already pushing beyond my normal behavior, but I said to myself that I was away in a city far from home, that no one in the room knew me, that he didn't look like he'd hit me, that I had nothing to lose apart from the humiliation, and so I figured I'd try again. I yelled in his ear and, this time, his head turned and he looked squarely at me in the eye, paused for a moment, and then turned away again. That seemed utterly clear.

I was getting ready to walk away a bit hurt, but, once again, figured I just don't want to miss this chance. So, this time, I leaned and yelled again, fully expecting a repeat, deciding that this was the fourth and last try and, if so, that I prepared myself to just walk away, no matter what, and accept the hurt. Surprisingly, however, he turned his head, looked directly at me and continued to look, and didn't say a word, but I kept talking and he kept looking. I monologued for a while and, eventually, he started talking. He later explained that he was very shy and down because of the breakup, so it wasn't easy for him to start talking.

We talked nonstop for six hours, literally, in the noisy bar, until 4 AM and then decided to move outside. We found an open café that was also a bookstore (Kramerbooks on Connecticut Avenue) and chatted and ate there until 7 A.M. My meeting was at 8 A.M. We planned to get together again that evening and we continued to meet every evening through the end of the work week.

On Friday night, my meetings over, I moved from my downtown hotel to his new apartment in Rockville and we spent a dreamy weekend together. I remember the first time we went shopping at the nearby Giant Supermarket on Rockville Pike and I was thrilled because shopping for food together felt so domestic and intimate. I flew back to Boston on Sunday night and we talked every evening that week. On Friday he flew up to Boston for the first time and we basically continued meeting in Boston every weekend for three years (I flew to D.C. on some occasions). In 1990, he moved to Boston and, of course, we've been together since then.

Once in Boston, Leland promptly secured a position at Massachusetts General Hospital in surgical research, though studies of oxygen effects on vascular endothelium did not excite him and he left after two years when his laboratory mate (to whom he had grown close while working in the same room) died of cancer. Discouraged and distressed, I encouraged him to take time off and to feel free to do what he wanted.

We had recently acquired a couple of parrots, which had become sources of entertainment in our household. Our Senegal parrot was named Kasimoo (meaning “Keeper of the Forest” in Wolof, the most widely spoken language in Senegal – yes, Leland came up with that one) and our African Grey parrot was Wozzo (a transliteration of oiseau, the French word for bird; that was mine). Both birds talk and Wozzo has a pretty good vocabulary. She always says Hello when we walk in and Goodbye or See Ya Later when we leave. In learning about fruit, Wozzo became frustrated with labelling bananas and apples, so for a while, she called both a “banapple.” They enjoy playing tricks on us like imitating the sound of incoming phone calls or saying Goodbye as we were approaching the end of a phone call. They are friends with the dogs, can tell them to do things before we do, let them know when we put fresh water in their bowls, and generously feed the dogs a sampling of their own food.



Leland with Yooki, Cobalt, and Matilda.

Given the role that the parrots had assumed in our lives, it wasn't surprising when Leland suggested that we attend the National Rare Breed Dog Show on the Washington (D.C.) Mall. In my naivete, I thought it was just to see cool dogs. Within weeks, we had acquired our first Shiba Inu which, at that time, was not yet recognized by the American Kennel Club and so was considered a “rare breed.” Tsunami (aka Yooki) ignored our birds and made himself at home. He was an easy dog, for the most part, as long as no one had any serious expectations of him. He had

a distinctly philosophical side: His idea of a good time was to go outdoors, sit down, and just watch what was happening around him. He liked the Berkshires where we had a second home in the mountainy terrain of Western Massachusetts, but he seemed more at home in the streets and parks of Cambridge.

Our second dog, a Miniature Australian Shepherd named Matilda, was also a rare breed at that time. Matilda, unlike Yooki, loved to run and jump, and landed on sofas with grace and precision. This led Leland to get her involved in dog sports, especially dog agility – which can be described as a combination of steeple chase and miniature golf. The dogs, accompanied by their human, run through a series of dog obstacles, like jumps, weave pools, elevated dog walks such as A-frames, and tunnels. Points are subtracted for errors and the dog with the fastest time wins. It's really a dog-human team sport because the human accompanies and directs the dog through a novel sequence of obstacles involving unexpected shifts in direction and tight turns.

Matilda and Leland quickly got into this sport and mastered it. They won hundreds, probably thousands, of ribbons for their successes and they quickly ascended from regional to national tournaments. They traveled extensively together meeting dog people and their pets all around New England and around the country. It's a particularly wonderful sport because everyone is friendly and surrounded by dogs all day, with people even helping coach each other in a friendly way, sometimes right during a trial at the highest levels of competition. It's as positive an environment as you can imagine with everyone running around with their dogs and having a good time. Leland and Matilda loved all this and they loved their preparatory training sessions together, especially out in the Berkshires, where Leland set up a complete dog agility course in one of the back fields.

The first time they attended the National Dog Agility Finals run by the American Kennel Club, Leland was just hoping to manage the anxiety and thrill of doing the dog runs there, so he approached it as just another training session. Somehow, by just setting minimal expectations on himself and Matilda, they actually won First Place in the Nationals in their height class (dog's height, which affects how high the jumps are). The sudden national visibility was a complete surprise for Leland and Matilda was surprised by the Chicken Caesar Sandwich she won as a jackpot reward from Leland for winning First Place. It seemed like a lucky fluke, but they took First Place again next year (and Fourth in another year). Leland always liked to do the best he could and he loved to win, but didn't have a rivalrous bone in his body. He and Matilda just loved the agility runs. He was surrounded by friends who adored them, and him, and he became a routine presence for years at dog agility shows around the country. The dog world was the arena in which Leland's depression and social anxiety finally no longer interfered with his ability to enjoy himself.

The AKC Agility Nationals were televised in those days, so shy Leland had the experience of doing these runs in front of 2,000-3,000 live spectators (yes, really), plus a delayed television audience. Matilda clearly was fired up by the presence of so many people cheering and the cameras kept rolling after she completed her first winning run and started jumping up and down on her hind feet until Leland kneeled down to let her lick his face. The TV producers clearly loved that and they ran that clip of Matilda jumping and Leland kneeling as part of their advertisements for future dog agility shows for several years. As a result of her TV advertisements, the airlines designated Matilda a "celebrity dog" and allowed her to sit in the cabin and have her own seat, but, for the most part, Leland drove the dogs around the country to go to the shows and to see the natural countryside.

Many people who successfully train dog agility champions, especially winners at the national level, become training instructors. They run seminars, do coaching sessions, write books, and distribute videos. Leland had no interest in that direction. He just wanted to continue to train and work with our dogs and to enjoy their enjoyment of the sports. He never taught and, instead, he continued to take lessons in agility(!), tracking, obedience, and, with the Australian Shepherds, even a little bit of sheep-herding. He loved the dogs' learning and growing their skills, teaching them, teaming with them, and enjoying the sports for the sake for the sport and the natural connection with the dogs they inspired.



We acquired three more dogs over the years, all Shiba Inus or Australian Shepherds: Cobalt, Takibi, and most recently, CJ – who was named after a nurse at Dana Farber Cancer Institute whom Leland particularly liked. All of the dogs did agility, as well as tracking (following a scent), and obedience (dog tricks) for the fun of it. Pairs of our dogs learned a game of running back and forth, each in an opposite direction, between Leland and me, alternately looking to give and seek affection with each of us, but only Matilda learned how to open the refrigerator and only she would sleep with her body draped over the top of our heads.

With and without the dogs, Leland loved Boston. He enjoyed the history, walked extensively through the neighborhoods, drove throughout the suburbs of Boston and many towns across Massachusetts, and learned of roads and connections that I didn't know after years of living here. We enjoyed cultural events and visiting artists, especially in classical music, and the Boston Symphony Orchestra. We ate out often with friends (there were probably some restaurants that we never tried). When a friend who was a single mother adopted a son, he stepped in and essentially became his de facto father. Leland cooked a lot, but never the same dish twice: Always a new recipe. He would consult a half dozen books and more websites to see variations in how a dish could be prepared, then made wildly ingenious changes and was surprisingly successful across a range of cuisines. He loved to experiment in cooking like he did in the lab.

Leland was taken by the Berkshires as well. Our home is surrounded by woods and there's a stream on the property that the dogs loved. Leland thrived in the natural environs of the Berkshires, an area that is rich in trees and hills and vistas, as well as cultural attractions such as Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, Tanglewood, professional theatres, and nationally ranked museums. We enjoyed the visits of our friends and relatives every weekend all summer. Leland actively promoted the protection of native plants there against the encroachment of invasive species and he loved the innumerable orange salamanders. (He was less happy about the porcupine who "got" one of our dogs or the deer who ate our strawberries.) His vegetable garden produced an uncontrollable number of varietal tomatoes. He pursued learning Japanese and later Italian, soap-making, and eventually a bit of origami.

We spent lengthy summer vacations there for over thirty years and, when COVID arrived, we moved out there and enjoyed over two years living together with the dogs and parrots away from the city and away from everyone. This was a very special time in our relationship, enjoying the woods and the isolation together, eating well, having lots of free time, and sharing it with our little gang. Tragic as that time was for the world, it was idyllic for us.

The final years, approximately coinciding with the pandemic, were complicated by a series of medical problems that Leland slowly acquired, all in the realm of cancer. He was successfully treated at Dana Farber for the first cancer with a successful course of surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation, but soon after, he learned that a chronic hematological condition (essential thrombocytosis) that he had developed some years before had transformed into myelofibrosis and that the only curative treatment involved a stem cell (bone marrow) transplant. The transplant procedure, while curative if it worked, entailed a 20% mortality risk. At first, Leland was advised to proceed with the transplant immediately, despite the risk, but a high-level second opinion encouraged waiting because of his weakened body defenses after the recent cancer chemotherapy.

Leland and I together faced the prospect of the serious prognosis, the high risk of the medical treatment, and the risk of waiting, knowing that the clock was ticking on the cancer and knowing, also, that his medical situation could deteriorate suddenly and rapidly. It took several months for us to come to terms with this and, as we waited, his blood counts seemed pretty stable. After about two years, Leland decided that we had two good years and that he was going to ask to proceed with the stem cell transplant at his next doctor's appointment. While waiting for that next appointment, his blood counts changed suddenly and dramatically, and he was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia.

The prospects for treatment of acute myeloid leukemia with myelofibrosis were dismal. This was a rare enough combination that there aren't good survival data in the medical literature, let alone treatment studies, but it was clear that the prospects were extremely poor. He was advised to enter the hospital immediately, without even time for a last visit to the Berkshires with the dogs, which he desperately wanted. After the first round of experimental chemotherapy, while waiting for the findings on the treatment effectiveness, we had one last visit with the dogs to the Berkshires around Thanksgiving. The lab results showed no benefit from the first chemotherapy and he went back into Dana Farber the next week to start on a second, much more strenuous and difficult, course of chemotherapy.

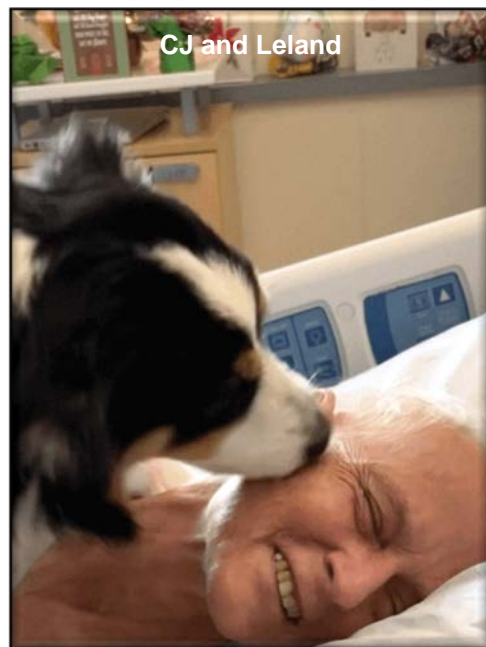
Leland was determined to get through it if he could and was remarkably focused and courageous in facing the bad odds and the serious side effects. He remained his lovely self, always thinking about others (even the doctors' feelings) all the way through, even after he was told by his doctor that he didn't honestly think the second chemotherapy would work and later when he was told that there were no more options.



Exactly two weeks before he died, after 35 years together, Leland and I got married. The ceremony in his hospital room was just the two of us with the hospital chaplain, but, afterward, the nurses went all out in arranging a perfect party. They brought in tons of food and (non-alcohol) drinks, which we enjoyed with the doctors, nurses, one of his siblings who had flown up from Florida, and two friends who happened to be there. The nurses went to shops near the hospital, told the merchants our story, and got a lot of donated food and gifts. The hospital sent their photographer. The nurses were enthusiastic and thrilled with the opportunity to commemorate and so we had a quick, impromptu, very celebratory event. We were totally thrilled and it gave Leland a big boost of energy for a couple of days during a time when he was steadily losing ground. It was incredibly meaningful for the two of us and that was great for all of us.

A few days after the wedding, the nurses conspired with the security staff to sneak (arguably illegally) one of our dogs into the hospital. CJ approached the bed cautiously and respectfully at first and then, when given an okay signal, she jumped onto the bed, avoided stepping on him, and started enthusiastically licking Leland's face. It was hard to tell who was enjoying it more. That was wonderful for all of us: A second celebration a few days after the first.

So we had some real highpoints during the last weeks and I was very grateful those could happen. The three youngest siblings – Candy, Gregory, and Elizabeth – came to be with Leland in the last days. The three older sibs – Toby, Buddy, and Elston – would have had difficulty flying in mid-winter, but they talked by phone in the last days. At the end, we had a few days when we had plenty of time to reminisce, to look at old photos together, to chat as long as he had the energy, and to say our goodbyes.



At a certain point, as he became too weak to move, he decided he wanted to be asleep, which was arranged, until the leukemia took him two days later. The doctors were fantastic at managing his side effects and symptoms all the way through. Though it was incredibly painful for all of us to watch, he slipped out comfortably and quietly.

We were fortunate enough to have extremely high-level care from the clinicians at Dana Farber, so at least we have the comfort of knowing that everything that could be done was done. Envisioning what the best management and most loving care could look like, Dana Farber was better than our imaginations hoped for. Also, living until age 69, it is heartening to know that Leland had an ample life and a very, very good one.

Within a day of when he died, two different dog clubs – the regional dog agility club and the regional tracking club – began talking about setting up permanent awards in Leland's name. As of this writing, the dog agility people are discussing what may be called the Leland Perry Light and Love Award, given for kindness, humor, compassion, and spreading happiness. He would have been thrilled and, of course, embarrassed.

Leland was very clear that he didn't want a funeral, a reception, or a memorial gathering, but he cried happily when I said that I wanted to set up some type of award in the dog world in his name. We didn't know that the loving people in the dog world would do this on their own. At his request, he was cremated and some ashes will be distributed in our stream in the Berkshires, on a dog tracking field he liked in New Hampshire, and in North Carolina at Kitty Hawk where his family went to the beach during his childhood summers and his siblings still do.



I, somehow, didn't think to ask him about donations in his memory, but I've had a lot of inquiries in recent days. There is little question that he'd be weirded out by the idea of money being donated in his name, but organizations I know he was interested in include: GiveWell Top Charities Fund, Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, Dana Farber Cancer Institute, American Kennel Club Canine Health Foundation, Native Plant Trust, and the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society.

I'm grateful for the decades I had with Leland and am glad that so many people had Leland in their lives for so long. For those who never knew him, I wish you had, too.

Charlie Popper  
February 3, 2023  
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