



Wayne Ashfield MacDonald

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A Tribute to My Dad, Wayne Ashfield MacDonald

My Dad was the smartest man I ever met. His brilliance was never something he held over others — it was something he shared with them. He had a rare gift for making people feel seen, heard, and worthy. Whether you were family, a friend, or one of his many students, he made you feel like you mattered.

My Dad was stubborn, passionate, and relentless — qualities that defined his strength and his purpose. When he believed in something, he pursued it completely. That same determination fueled his work as an educator, a builder, and a father. He challenged others not to settle, to think deeply, and to give their best — because that's exactly what he gave every day of his life.

As an educator, my Dad dedicated 34 years to teaching in the San Francisco Unified School District, where he inspired generations of students to believe in themselves. He pioneered experiential education long before it became common, co-teaching a summer wilderness leadership program for the University of California and founding the groundbreaking Urban Pioneer Program, which later became a charter high school built around hands-on learning, adventure, and service. Through this work, he didn't just teach lessons — he gave young people a sense of purpose, confidence, and a sense of belonging.

He lived by the belief, “Give a person a fish and they eat for a day, but teach someone to fish and they will eat for a lifetime.” That was more than a saying to him — it was a way of life. He provided food, shelter, and wisdom, and he truly listened to them.

His life was filled with adventure and compassion. He volunteered at the Phanat Nikhom refugee camp in Thailand, where he worked with children who had survived unimaginable hardship. He developed and led wilderness expeditions, ropes courses, and whitewater rafting trips, helping countless students and colleagues discover the courage and teamwork they needed. He even wrote training manuals on outdoor safety and appeared in television and magazine features for his work in education and advocacy.

My Dad taught by doing. When I was young, he taught me auto mechanics by rebuilding a car together. It wasn't always easy — and that was the point. When I wanted to quit a summer program as a swim aid, my father taught me about commitment, not letting me quit. I had made a commitment to help that summer, and I had to see it through. When you make a commitment, you follow through. And whenever frustration crept in, he'd remind me of another of his guiding beliefs — “I can't” does not exist.

He taught his children construction through experience, working beside us as we remodeled our first homes. With patience and precision, he showed us how to build, wire, and repair nearly anything. He developed mastery in blueprinting, carpentry, foundations, electricity, plumbing, roofing, and concrete — and he utilized those skills to transform a simple barn into a two-story Victorian home, a stunning testament to his craftsmanship and vision.

My Dad's accomplishments were vast, but his humility never allowed them to define him. He earned a Master's Degree with a thesis, three degrees, and three teaching credentials. He served on community boards including Elkus

Ranch, the San Francisco Science Center, and Bay Area Wilderness Training. He even found time to play guitar in a rock band called Spring Steel and to help start organic gardens in San Francisco. He'd worked the docks, managed a lumber yard, driven trucks for the Teamsters' Union, and painted houses — always working hard, always learning, always giving.

At home, my Dad's love was generous and alive with tradition. He and my mom, Joanne, created a home that was open to all — especially during Thanksgiving, when they would welcome fifty to sixty family members and friends to their table. He hosted legendary crab cioppino feeds, bringing everyone together over laughter and good food. He purchased a vacation home in Arnold, where his grandchildren looked forward to gathering every Fourth of July — a tradition that continues to this day.

He also shared his love of the outdoors by taking us backpacking, teaching us to appreciate nature's beauty and its quiet lessons of endurance and awe. Those experiences shaped who we are and how we see the world.

He was a devoted husband to Joanne, a proud father to Sean and Ehren, and a loving father-in-law to Charlene and Bianca. He was a kind and generous grandfather to Kiera, Benicio, Aiden, Gabriela, and Dominic — showering them with gifts, attention, and endless encouragement.

My Dad's life was a masterclass in living with purpose, conviction, and kindness. He built, taught, created, and loved with his whole heart. His legacy lives on in every life he touched — in his students, his community, his friends, and most of all, in his family.

Thank you, Dad, for everything — for the love, the lessons, and for giving me me.