

Lee O'Connor

February 19, 1948 - March 21, 2021

Leon Philip O'Connor III

February 19, 1948 – March 21, 2021

Lee had a ready smile, a listening ear, a helping hand, a pure heart, and a certain way of calling a friend “you rotten kid,” that elicited instant laughter, particularly from youngsters. He loved spending time at his homes in Manhattan and West Cape May, NJ, and enjoyed riding his bike or scooter in both locations. From working back stage or on stage, to being in the audience, he was passionate about all aspects of theater. As an art and history lover, he enjoyed visiting museums and reading history books. In West Cape May, he looked forward to being the spelling bee moderator at the local elementary school, and scaring trick-or-treaters on Halloween from the front porch by making eerie sounds on a PA system. But spending time with friends and swapping stories - that was the best time of all.

He died in hospice in his Jersey home with his wife, Gayle, by his side. Treatments for cancer began in October 2019, and due to the efforts of those at Weill Cornell/N.Y. Presbyterian and AtlantiCare, he had a few very good months. Those at Compassionate Care Hospice helped Gayle to help Lee through his final eight days.

The oldest of Leon Philip O'Connor, Jr. and Kathleen Hubbell O'Connor's seven children, Lee was born in Washington, D.C., and was raised in Levittown, Long Island and then Levittown, PA. A highlight at Neshaminy High School in Langhorne, was the first time he experienced being part of a choir, singing four-part harmony to Kern and Hammerstein II's “All the Things You Are,” his second favorite song. This led to his performing in the high school musicals. After graduating in 1966, he studied liberal arts at Bucks County Community College and interned at Bucks County Playhouse.

On February 24, 1969, Lee enlisted in the Army and was sent to Vietnam. While an infantryman in the field, he contracted jungle rot in his feet and had to be medivacked to Saigon, where he finished his service working with an Army theater troupe. He was

honorably discharged on September 29, 1970, with the Combat Infantryman Badge, Sharpshooter Badge with Rifle Bar, National Defense Service Medal, Vietnam Service Medal, Vietnam Campaign Medal, and the Good Conduct Medal. In 1988, with the help of Alcoholics Anonymous, he stopped drinking. In 2014, he finally sought the real help he needed from the Veterans Administration, which formally declared that he suffered from PTSD.

After Nam, he majored in history at Pennsylvania State University, and worked for IBM and 3M. In 1979, he moved to NYC where he met Gayle. They were married on November 8, 1981.

In NYC, Lee was house manager at the Bijou Theatre, while starting to work on production crews, and sought work as an actor and stage manager, eventually becoming a member of Actors' Equity Association. Credits include production assistant for "Liza with a Z" at Radio City Music Hall and "A Christmas Carol" at Madison Square Garden Theatre (10 years), stage manager for "Wuthering Heights: The Musical" at Second Stage, and prop master for "Penn and Teller Rot in Hell." When Gayle was commissioned by The Smithsonian Institution to write a play about mental health advocate Dorothea Lynde Dix, she wrote the two-person "Not Above a Whisper" that she performed with Lee. After premiering at The Smithsonian, they performed for various mental health organizations throughout the country.

Lee stage managed for several regional theaters, including East Lynne Theater Company (ELTC), where Gayle was already performing. It was while working for ELTC, with productions in both Rutherford and Cape May, that Gayle and Lee fell in love with Cape May and purchased a house here in 1993. When ELTC's founder and artistic director passed away in 1998, the Board of Trustees asked Gayle to be the next artistic director, a position she still holds. Lee became the company's technical director and stage manager. Together, they mounted 115 different productions between 1999 – 2020. He thoroughly enjoyed playing Sherlock Holmes in the staged readings of William Gillette's "Sherlock Holmes" in 2003-2004, and then in the Sherlock Holmes' NBC radio-style plays from 2005 – 2019. He also relished reading short stories as part of ELTC's "Tales of the Victorians," assisting Gayle when she directed plays at West Cape May Elementary School and at ELTC's own Student Summer Workshop.

From 1988 – 1993, Lee and Gayle were caregivers for friends with AIDS, and from 1990-2000, served on the Board of the Episcopal Actors' Guild, an organization founded in 1923 to help professionals in the entertainment industry of all faiths. From 1999 – 2021, Lee served on the Board of ELTC, and from 2004 - 2021, volunteered for the Food Closet of

Cape May City. He signed up as a volunteer for the fire department in 2018 as a “thank you” for the firemen who tried to save their 1840’s cottage in West Cape May.

Lee is preceded in death by his mother, Kathleen Hubbell O'Connor; father, Leon P. O'Connor, Jr.; and nephew, Michael K. O'Connor. He is survived by his wife, Gayle Stahlhuth; and his siblings: Kathy Hart (husband Jack), Kevin O'Connor (wife Lauren), Mark O'Connor, Beth Worthington (husband Charles), Sean O'Connor, and Christopher O'Connor (wife Debora), as well as nieces and nephews and grand-nieces and nephews.

Lee’s memorial ceremony can be attended via livestream only. Plans for a larger celebration will be made when the pandemic is over. The livestream memorial ceremony will take place on Saturday (April 10th) at 1pm in the Spilker Funeral Home, Cape May. The livestream will be active at 12:50pm and can be accessed by clicking this link <https://client.tribucast.com/tcid/61121446>

In lieu of flowers, Gayle requests making donations to the Lee O’Connor Memorial Fund at East Lynne Theater Company, PO Box 121, Cape May, NJ 08204. Checks may be made to the theater, with “Lee O’Connor Memorial Fund” on the memo line.

Lee’s first favorite song: “When You Wish Upon a Star.”

Previous Events

Memorial Service

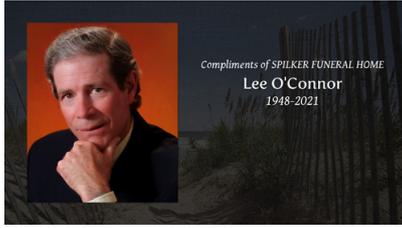
APR 10. 1:00 PM (ET)

Spilker Funeral Home
815 Washington Street
Cape May, NJ 08204
spilkerfuneralhome@comcast.net

Tribute Wall



“ *Spilker Funeral Home created a Tribute Video in memory of Lee O'Connor*



Spilker Funeral Home - April 08, 2021 at 02:05 PM

CG

*Lee and I were best of friends.
I will always have the best of memories of him.
Chris Green*

chris green - July 11, 2021 at 06:47 PM



“ *1 file added to the album Lee's recorded memorial service*



Spilker Funeral Home - May 13, 2021 at 01:11 PM

AC

Oh! What a beautiful soul!!!

Ann Ellen Conley - June 23, 2021 at 07:02 PM

GS

Yes, indeed.

Gayle Stahlhuth - June 26, 2021 at 07:07 AM

BR

“ *We were so sorry to hear of Lee's passing. We know how much he meant to the family. Please accept our sincerest condolences over your loss. I remember how excited Mark was when Lee and Gail first visited him here in Wenonah. It wasn't a long visit, but it meant the world to Mark. Please know we will keep you in our prayers.*



Bryan Cole Smith & Keith Richardson - April 15, 2021 at 07:28 PM

CL

“ Had the pleasure of meeting Lee while performing at some of the festivals in town where he was running the sound. He always had a smile and a laugh ready for us when we got there. Lee was a highlight for us, always kind, always ready to help. He will be missed and we are blessed to have had the pleasure of knowing him for awhile. So sorry for your loss, Gayle. Another light left the ground to shine over her among the stars above. Peace, C.Lynne & Terri

C. Lynne - April 14, 2021 at 12:37 AM

GS

“ 1 file added to the album Lee in 2018: Memorial Day



Gayle Stahlhuth - April 12, 2021 at 07:35 AM

GS

“ 1 file added to the album Lee reading "The Cowboy Prayer"



Gayle Stahlhuth - April 12, 2021 at 07:33 AM

GS

“ 1 file added to the tribute wall



Gayle Stahlhuth - April 12, 2021 at 07:25 AM



“ Lee's ceremony recording - click this link
<https://client.tribucast.com/tcid/61121446>

Dennis Spilker - April 10, 2021 at 02:52 PM

DK

“ Dear Lee, Thank you for taking care of us during DM's work there doing Rogers Romance in 2016. Thank you for sharing yourself and making me laugh and giving us shelter in your home. I wish I could have shared more moments with you and Gayle. Peace always, with love, Laura Leigh Barbour

Lee, The last cue was called. House Lights came up and another performance ended. Each time that happened when you stage managed a show, the audience left having been touched by what they had experienced on stage. That was only part of the legacy you leave, for you touched so many others who never even set foot into your theatre.

Thank you for being spectacular in so many ways. David-Michael Kenney

David-Michael Kenney - April 10, 2021 at 02:01 PM

GR

“ Lee, I will always walk into the Cape May Jazz Vespers and hear your voice calling me (and my girls) rotten kids and laughing. On the serious, you also said such kind, heartfelt words to me after every performance. I feel like one of the fortunate ones to have shared many musical moments in your supportive and loving presence. I promise to always smile when I think of you. Love gina

Gina Roche - April 10, 2021 at 06:41 AM

TF

“ Lee was our neighbor for quite a few years. He was one of a kind. We loved talking to him, loved hearing his stories. My kids knew him from when he would help out at school, too. Always so kind and always willing to help someone out. He truly was a very talented man. We loved going by for Halloween, he really made it fun for Trick or Treating. We will miss him very much.

The Cox Family - April 09, 2021 at 10:51 PM

DS

“ I remember seeing Lee who starred in a play, “Bye Bye Birdie”, at the Washington Crossing Park, on the New Jersey side, it had to be sometime around 1967 or '68. We sat in the open air, on chairs near the front, in the evening. I think we drove there in the O'Connor's big old Chevy station wagon.



dave sommers - April 09, 2021 at 08:24 PM

JS

“ *This is a moving tribute to a wonderful life.
I didn't have the privilege to know Lee, but heard of his passion for theater from Mark. Please accept my condolences.*
Joe Schwartz

Joseph Schwartz - April 08, 2021 at 11:25 PM

BB

*Dear Gayle and all those who loved Lee,
My deepest sympathy.
Lee was a force of nature, ready to move to lend a hand and ready to stop to have a conversation. To me he was the personification of The Presbyterian Church Cape May home to The East Lynne Theatre. He made theatre come alive both acting on the stage and stage managing in the back. His smile, energy and magnetic personality will both stay with me on one level and also be missed.*

Barbara Blair - April 10, 2021 at 01:46 PM

LK

“ *Lisa Marks Kleiser lit a candle in memory of Lee O'Connor*



Lisa Marks Kleiser - April 08, 2021 at 11:19 PM

RB

“ My "Guardian Angel" from the first weekend we ever stayed at 118 Decatur. There was never a day since the first two weeks of August in the summer of 2014 that Lee O' Connor and I did not spend in deepest dialogues about his life in the theater in Manhattan and his journey through the alleys of regional theater in Cape May if we were "in residence".

From our first meeting he steered me through the tangles of cultural and city politics in our Victorian seaside community. He expressed surprise at the start that I always wanted anyone who might ask to know that 118 Decatur was "Libby Goodman's house", which it was for decades, run as seasonal apartments.

He shared his appreciation for the builders and owners of The Empress, who he and his wife counted as dear friends.

He would generally be seen tearing around some corner between West Cape May and the Presbyterian Church, home of the East Lynne Theater Company. If a production was on I would find him either at the aluminum church hall door, or other times on the steps directly opposite my own, enjoying his cigarettes.

He gave unstinting service to the church building. One season he borrowed my lawnmower and trimmer. For that summer I never clipped a blade of grass.

He was convinced he would beat his cancer, which is how it should be. I pulled his head shot from his obit. It depicts the way every man or woman who ever "trod the boards" would wish to be remembered.

Break a leg, Lee.

Rich Brautigam - April 08, 2021 at 06:25 PM

RB

“ When my wife and I would attend the Jazz Vespers she often needed to use the elevator. Lee would say to me " I'll take care of your girlfriend. Keep an eye on her or I'll steal her from you ". He always made her feel so happy. She passed away recently. I'm sure Lee will be continuing to her now.

Rich Bak - April 08, 2021 at 05:11 PM

JR

“ I will always appreciate the way he took care of my dad when my mom passed away. I was blessed to be able to meet him and enjoy his company at my mom's funeral. Sending love and prayers to Gayle and family.

Janna Richards - April 05, 2021 at 11:54 PM

BJ

“ I always admired the way Lee worked like crazy behind the scenes to allow theater and concert-goers to enjoy show without having to worry about anything and just be swept away by the performance. His imagination for making something out of nothing, his "can do" attitude and his sense of humor set a bar to which I'll aspire for the rest of my life. Thanks Lee! It was so good to know you. RIP.

Bruce Jeffries-Fox - April 05, 2021 at 10:04 AM

DG

“ My favorite memory of Lee is from the visit he and Gayle made to my place at the Carissa Mine in South Pass City, Wyoming. My sister Kathy, who knew Gayle from college, was also there, and we enjoyed a wonderful, but odd dinner at the Miner's Delight Restaurant at a time when the original owners were still alive and cooking. I showed them around the historic townsites and gold mines in the district, and then, at Lee's insistence, we went fishing. We walked down through the old placer tailings on Rock Creek. It took a while, but I found a good spot to fish. Lee wanted to try first, so he moved along the creek bank till he could find a spot where he could cast without getting tangled in the willow branches. I let him fish for fifteen minutes or so without offering local advice. He said there weren't any fish in that pool. I balanced on the beaver dam downstream and cast my line over the dam. After two casts, I had a brook trout. "Let me try that spot," Lee insisted. Being a good host, I turned it over to him. After at least another twenty minutes he had caught nothing. "Just one fish here," he declared. I stepped alongside him and made a cast very near where he had been trying. Got another Brookie and reeled it in. "These fish don't like New Yorkers," he muttered, and that was it for fishing that day.

Dave Geible - April 04, 2021 at 02:51 PM

GS

Love this memory! As I also recall, when Lee walked in the water, he splashed around and made noise - alerting the fish. You and I were quiet.

Gayle Stahlhuth - April 09, 2021 at 08:45 AM

MZ

“ One of my greatest joys in my tenure as MAC Director was to present our Outstanding Volunteer Service Award to Lee -- not once, not twice, but three times (a near-record achieved by only three other people). Why were we so grateful to Lee? In part, it was because of the invaluable sound and light skills that he donated for our musical performances, especially the Music Festival concerts at the Presbyterian Church. Equally important, though, was the good cheer and joy he radiated wherever he went. I well remember how, when confronted with the inevitable technical glitches, Lee would come bounding down the aisle with a radiant smile and soon put everything aright. His spirit was a gift to the whole Cape May community, and will be sorely missed. My heartfelt condolences to Gayle and all the members of the ELTC family.

Michael Zuckerman

Michael Zuckerman - April 01, 2021 at 03:05 PM

LM

“ Lee always treated my young daughter Rainbow special whenever we would go to East Lynn. We miss him greatly.

Louis Mcatee - April 01, 2021 at 10:34 AM

ND

“ Lee instantly bonded with any member of my family who came through the church doors, always finding some way to make them laugh or engage them in conversation. I miss his irreverent jokes, amazing stories, and ridiculously helpful presence. So grateful to have known him. --Nicole Duran

Nicole Duran - March 29, 2021 at 01:16 PM

ND

“ 3 files added to the album Lee at church



Nicole Duran - March 29, 2021 at 01:13 PM

ND

“ 1 file added to the album Lee at church



Nicole Duran - March 29, 2021 at 01:11 PM

DS

“ I really liked Lee! He was one of those kind of people who made a sincere connection - I wasn't just an actor who auditioned for him and Gayle. Both of them connected with me as a person and I think that's rare - I wanted to be friends with both of them. I remember Lee telling me about his cancer at an EPA (by the monitor's desk). He acknowledged it but he didn't show fear- it was as if he had the mindset that cancer would not rule him. I'm sad that this world has lost him. He was one of the good guys.
-Donna

Donna Stearns - March 27, 2021 at 02:19 PM

LA

“ I met Lee in the 70's prior to his marriage to Gayle Stahlhuth with whom I did a play in dinner theater in 1977, and we remained friends
I was so glad I was able to go to their New York wedding reception prior to their marriage in Indiana in November of that year
I tried very hard to keep my friends close even when I did not see them. I will always wish I had more time
I will be looking at pictures from over the years as days and weeks move forward.
I will always miss you. dearest Lee . You were always such a sweetheart
My love and prayers go out to my dear friend Gayle and all of their friends and family and I have been honored over the past forty years to be included in their number.
Sleep in peace dear friend until we meet again
🍀💔🍀

Lucille Annunziata - March 27, 2021 at 01:33 AM

JW

Such sad news learning that this dear man has passed on. Our hearts go out to Gayle, his side kick, his towering pillar of strength, his love. We will lovingly remember Lee and all that he meant to this community, his friends and his family.

Jack & Arlette Wright - March 27, 2021 at 07:39 AM

WK

A smile, a nod, an affirmation. I hope Lee's spirit will live on in Cape May. I will truly miss the person. Gayle, I am so sorry for your loss.

Wilhelmina Korevaar - March 27, 2021 at 07:58 AM

SL

Lee was always so supportive of the ELTC actors and made me feel always that I was a wonderful performer. He was so real and shared himself with caring.
Suzanne Longacre and John Gideonse

Suzanne B Longacre - March 28, 2021 at 01:01 PM

KG

It was around 5 AM and Lee was volunteering to take me to the airport for my emergency trip to Florida. We were doing the speed limit when we came across a sudden accident that was still in progress at an exit on the highway. We stopped on the roadside and got out of the car. We found the car in the woods, still smoking and Lee immediately covered the decapitated driver with a cloth and went looking on the passenger side and found an alive but seriously injured fellow crushed in a seat. Lee stayed with him while I went to the road where my cell phone was working and sent for help. The help soon arrived and the two of us hustled back to the car and drove off. Lee checked the hospital later and found that the guy was going to live.

Ken Glickfeld - March 28, 2021 at 01:36 PM

EC

Real. Lee was real, authentic in a world that can be filled with insincerity. He was funny, caring, talented and creative, always helpful and supportive. Gayle, you two complemented each others talents and strengths in so many ways. So hard to fathom Cape May and East Lynne theater without Lee.

Elissa Campanella - March 29, 2021 at 11:24 AM

KV

While I did not know Lee personally, I feel like I knew him from the 20+ years I have been attending performances at the ELTC. I always enjoyed watching him take care of the technical aspects of the performances, listening to him announce before a show, selling chances to contest giveaways, or helping out with jazz vespers. He led a full life and was involved in so many wonderful aspects of the theater. I will miss his presence at ELTC.

Kathy Villanelli April 1, 2021

Kathy Villanelli - April 01, 2021 at 09:34 AM

MM

As volunteer ushers at the legendary ELTC, we remember Lee as a professional actor, tech. wizard, etc. always with a ready smile and a witty remark. The indomitable Lee and Gayle brought joy to our lives. Heartfelt sympathy and love to Gayle and family. Lee will be missed and forever remembered. Much love, Mary Ann and Gus Mosso

Mary Ann and Gus Mosso - April 01, 2021 at 11:41 AM

CA

Lee was a great friend. We loved his zest for life and wry sense of humor. We'll miss our NYC lunches and dinners with him and Gayle, and we'll miss hanging with him, and enjoying his deft stage managing, during our annual trips to Cape May. But we'll think of him always, especially every time we renew our precious friendship with Gayle.

Cathy and Charles Alexander

Cathy and Charles Alexander - April 03, 2021 at 01:39 PM

ZJ

I am deeply saddened to learn of Lee's passing and, sadly, I did not know of his terminal illness in time to visit him and tell him how much I love him and the many ways he has been an inspiration to me. Each time I saw Lee at church, and there must have been thousands of times, he said or did something to make me smile. His passing is an enormous loss to all of us who loved him like family. He has been the go-to person at church for anything and everything, and right now it's impossible for me to think about the church without him. He and Gayle have been inspiring for me personally. I wish I could tell you in person, Lee.

Zan Jeffries-Fox - April 03, 2021 at 04:39 PM

LF

Lee was a beautiful soul. He was generous and thoughtful who was always willing to help others. He made us laugh whenever he was around. His stories and smile will never be forgotten. We love you Lee and are greatly thankful to have had you in our lives.

Richard and Luisa Dinis Ferrer

Luisa Dinis Ferrer - April 09, 2021 at 11:01 AM



Have just read through all of these tributes, memories, recollections- so much in our associations with Lee (and Gayle) to remember and reminisce about with love. Kindness. Giving of oneself. Sense of Humor. Devotion to Community. Incredible Neighbor. Sacrifice- let me share something that is included in many of our West Cape May monthly meetings: [Please, take a moment to reflect upon the sacrifices made by our men and women in the Armed Services, both home & abroad and past & present.] When Lee recently passed by the West Cape May Volunteer Fire Company, for the last time, he and Gayle were greeted with a tribute to Lee's Dedication to our Community and his Sacrifices made to and for our Country and his Family. Lee (and Gayle), Thank You from the bottom of my heart. Peter Burke

Peter Burke - April 10, 2021 at 06:05 AM

CB

We knew Lee from church and volunteering for ELTC. Lee was a great guy and was like the Energizer Bunny. He was constantly in motion - climbing ladders, working in the food closet, and transforming the church from a theater to a house of worship. And, always with a Diet Pepsi nearby!

Both Gayle and Lee made all the ELTC volunteers feel very much appreciated and as much a part of the East Lynne family as the actors. Lee will be greatly missed.

Connie and Jim Blocher

Connie Blocher - April 10, 2021 at 11:43 AM