

Eulogy for Gart Westerhout

delivered at his memorial service in Catonsville, MD, November 20, 2012
by his son Gart Thomas Westerhout

On June 15, 1927 in The Hague, Netherlands, a son was born to the architect Gart Westerhout and the novelist Magda Foppe. When the son was a teenager in wartime Holland, towns were blacked out at night, and the son spent evenings gazing at the stars. The father, a number of whose buildings are still in use today, built a hospital, and drew maps of the stars on the ceiling for the benefit of bedridden patients.

The son went on to earn his PhD at the University of Leiden, one of the younger members of an elite group of pioneers in the new field of radio astronomy. It was at an astronomical conference in Dublin in 1955 where he met the charming Irish girl who was on the administrative staff of the conference.

The following year they were married, and in 1962 the son, now a father thrice over, took his wife and children across the sea to build an astronomy program at the University of Maryland, which under his guidance grew to be one of the most respected programs in the country. Summers were spent observing on the 300 foot radio telescope at the NRAO in Green Bank, WV, idyllic times for the whole family. Later he would serve for 15 years as Scientific Director of the US Naval Observatory in Washington DC, retiring to Baltimore in 1993.

Gart Westerhout, scientist, was instrumental in creating the first detailed map of the spiral structure of the Milky Way and went on to publish more than 70 papers.

Gart Westerhout, teacher, known for both his work with non-majors who took his popular Introduction to Astronomy classes and for the profound influence he had on his graduate students, many of whom went on to highly successful careers in the field. Several have written to my mother in the past few weeks expressing their deep respect for their former mentor.

In the Astronomy 1 classes, he used his sense of showmanship to keep the students engaged. Two of his memorable props were the trashcan and the tricycle. He would stand up on a desk and drop feathers and then rocks into a trashcan to demonstrate gravity. To teach rocket-powered propulsion, he rigged up a fire extinguisher onto a tricycle and zoom across the stage "propelled" by the "rocket."

Gart Westerhout, father, spent much of his spare time at home on weekends creating a playland us – in the house in which we grew up we had a handmade playhouse outside, a treehouse inside (which I have copied in my own home for my own children), a cable car swing, and much more. Weekend breakfasts were his domain, and we kids loved to eat “pannacakes” on Saturday or Sunday mornings.

Gart Westerhout, enthusiast and possessor of a great curiosity and zest for life. Great laugh, great sense of humor, a great joi de vivre. It was this positive spirit which surely kept him going through many operations over the past 30 years. We used to compare him to the famous energizer bunny, he just kept on going and going.

Our mother supported him through his whole career and retirement, and he could not have reached the pinnacle of success he did without her. Both of them also showed never-ending support and love for us, for which I would like to say to both of them – thank you from the bottom of our hearts.

I would like to close by with these slightly adjusted lines from a song familiar to all.

When you wished to study stars
With your bow tie and cigars
Everything your heart desired
Came to you.

Since your heart was in your dream
No request was too extreme
When you wished upon a star
Your dreams came true.

Keep shining on.