

Thomas Rex McCray

February 27, 1953  December 2, 2024

Thomas Rex McCray, beloved husband, father, son, brother, loyal friend, jazz musician, geographer, professor, and scholar died unexpectedly on December 2, 2024, in Columbia, Missouri, his home for the past 21 years. He had been chronically ill for the past 6 months. Born in Tracy, California, on February 27, 1953, to Stevastine (Stevie) Mae and Orville Rex McCray, Tom immediately found himself in a family that nurtured an insatiable love of nature, knowledge, and community.

As a child, Tom began pursuing music, practicing the drums as much as possible. He would be propelled forward in this field by music educators in Tracy, including Don Keller and Joe Foster. After graduating from Tracy High School in 1971, Tom continued learning from working musicians such as Louis Belson and would play at great venues such as the Monterey Jazz Festival and with jazz greats like Dizzy Gillespie. He not only pursued his own passion for music but also strove to uplift and inspire other musicians and audience members.

Tom would likely have continued loving and excelling in playing jazz music if he had not experienced a spinal cord injury in 1978. He did learn to play the drums again, well enough to make a living, playing with partner and friend Bob Muller in locations like the Inn at Death Valley NP and Yosemite's Awhawnee Hotel, as well as various cruise line ships which took him around South America twice, through the Panama Canal, and along Alaska's Inner Passage.

By 1990, Tom started taking classes at West Valley Community College (WVCC), in Saratoga, CA, where he met professor, mentor, and friend Don Reasons, who taught geography. Tom had enjoyed traveling to and living in places like Paris, New York, Miami, and Algeria. At WVCC, he learned that his world view and passion for travel could be put to good use in the field of geography. He went on to procure BA and MA degrees in geography from San Francisco State University in 1987 and 1990, with special interests in political, economic, and regional geography. His regional area of specialty was the Soviet Union.



Returning to WVCC in 1990, Tom became a full-time geography instructor. He loved teaching a variety of courses such as physical, cultural, and economic geography and geographies of the Soviet/post-Soviet regions.

Tom eventually moved to Lawrence, Kansas, and was accepted in a graduate program in geography at the University of Kansas. Tom's journey towards obtaining a Ph.D. in Geography with an emphasis on post-Soviet regions in 1999, was lined with a myriad of accomplishments and adventures. At this time, just after the break-up of the Soviet Union, Tom studied in places such as Leningrad, Novosibirsk, and Moscow. He was proud to have been the first westerner to address students at a university in post-Soviet Uzbekistan. He also was a US State Department Language Scholar, speaking Uzbek, Russian, French, and Spanish, and a National Security Education Program Fellow.

In the mid-nineties, Tom met Catherine Caruthers, and they were married on June 1, 1997. Tom and Cathy were supportive partners as they each pursued their terminal degrees in geography and medicine, respectively. They settled in Kansas City, Missouri, where Tom taught at Longview College, Johnson County Community College and at the University of Central Missouri in Warrensburg, Missouri. They also became parents to sons Ethan and Aaron McCray.

The family of four eventually settled in a home that Tom loved in the forest near the Missouri River in Columbia, MO. Here, Tom taught at the University of Missouri-Columbia as well as Columbia College and William Woods University in Fulton, Missouri. The McCrays enjoyed taking 2-3 driving trips per year traversing the country from coast to coast, visiting friends and family and national parks along the way, with Tom driving those long distances.

During Tom's career, he authored numerous geography-related articles as well as textbooks on Russia and Uzbekistan. He was a member and past chair of the Missouri Academy of Sciences Senior Geography Division. Tom continued studying and writing about geo-political and economic changes in the US and abroad, and he could always be counted on for a lively conversation about conditions around the world.

As a father, Thomas strived to encourage an inquisitive, earnest, and empathetic mindset. His parenting emphasized a love of nature and an expectation to improve ourselves through education, meditation, and honesty. Each day, he found opportunities to pass down lessons to his children through their mistakes and achievements. To him, there was never a moment when he felt he could not inspire a new perspective or pass along knowledge. He would consistently use phrases such as, "Be here now" to remind his loved ones to enjoy the present and avoid resenting any moment in favor of another. Being his son meant feeling his love with every passing second. His wife and sons still feel his love every day.

Tom is survived by his wife of 27 years, Dr. Catherine McCray, of the home; sons, Ethan McCray in Kansas City, Aaron McCray in Tucson, Arizona; brother, Ray McCray and his wife Ellen in Tracy, California, and their children; niece, Leslee McCray in San Francisco, California; nephew, David McCray in Tracy, California.

Thoughts of Tom are welcome, and donations in his name may be made to the Arbor Day Foundation. (Tom was a self-proclaimed tree hugger.)

A virtual memorial service is currently being planned. Please send your e-mail address to ccmccray1964@gmail.com if you would like to attend.