M. Lee Davisson (1962-2024)

Lee was a kind-hearted and intelligent man, a dear friend, and a devoted husband and father who spent his career as an isotope geochemist and groundwater consultant. He passed away at the age of 62 at home in Livermore, California on September 6th, 2024 from Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS).

Lee was born to David and Billie Davisson on September 1, 1962 in Indianapolis, Indiana.

During his childhood, he had a newspaper route, getting up at 5 a.m. every morning, a habit he kept throughout his career. A few cross-country roadtrips with his family spurred a lifelong curiosity about geology. After spending his childhood in Indianapolis, he graduated from high school in Manassas, VA, and moved to the San Francisco Bay Area, where he started working in the printing industry. After his father, and then his mother died before he turned 24, he decided to return to San Francisco City College, and later transferred to the University of California, Davis to earn his Bachelor's in Geology and his Master's in Geochemistry under the mentorship of Robert Criss. They later became co-authors, co-researchers, and shared a 35+ year friendship.

Lee joined the Chemistry and Materials Science Division of Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in 1992. Here, he was instrumental developing innovative applications of isotope hydrology to support multiple laboratory programs in water resources and groundwater protection. His work in Southern Nevada was prominent during the evaluation of environmental effects of the underground nuclear weapons detonations at the Nevada Test Site. Lee also developed significant collaborations with the Orange County Water District in Southern California to advise and support their groundwater restoration and recycling program, one of the earliest, largest, and most heralded programs of this sort in the world.

After moving between several divisions, he transferred to the Forensic Science Center (FSC). Here, he worked on projects in Nuclear Nonproliferation, ranging from detailed analytical chemistry projects in his laboratory to first responder training events and also to scientific engagement projects across the globe. He was among the first US technical teams to travel to Libya and Jordan to train Libyan and Iraqi nuclear weapons scientists on how to establish water quality programs. Lee also traveled to and consulted with nuclear scientists in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, aiding in their nuclear nonproliferation programs.

Later, he supported the FSC's Department of State Bureau of International Security and Nonproliferation programs by training emergency first responders from Iraq, Kenya, Malaysia and Lebanon in detecting threat chemical and biological materials. As an instructor, Lee provided our foreign partners with the skills needed to protect themselves during a suspect threat event, screen for suspect threat materials, rescue victims, and implement decontamination procedures.

Above all, at the Lab, Lee is remembered as "the nicest of colleagues and friends. He was inclusive, collaborative, imaginative, constantly learning, and always ready to lend a hand. Lee was incredibly accomplished, talented, and passionate ... but never arrogant or self-important. In short, Lee was 'the kind of guy that makes going to work worth it.'"

In 2012, he started his own groundwater consulting business to foster groundwater solutions in the Owens Valley, Medicine Lake, Hat Creek, the Amargosa Desert, Mount Shasta, and the Republic of Haiti, and help clients determine the resiliency of their groundwater.

Lee met his wife, Heidi, while they were neighbors in San Francisco and married a few years later. During their 36 years together, they raised their kids and traveled to places like France, England, Australia, Canada, Hawaii, and Israel. They enjoyed hiking, skiing, musical performances, theater, and annual trips to Lake Tahoe and beyond with their extended families. Family trips always included some form of geological exploration, whether in the Mojave Desert, Lehman Caves, Zion, Bryce, or any place on the side of the road.

Lee was absolutely devoted to making sure he showed up for his family. He started work early, took a break to make his kids breakfast and lunch, went back to work, and returned home to have dinner with his family. Sometimes, after the kids were in bed, he would continue working from home, or go back to the Lab to continue his experiments. He also wished to expand their horizons, and wanted them all to graduate from college.

He gave to others knowing he would get back tenfold. He was an adult literacy volunteer through the Livermore Library Literacy Program, a Cub Scout Den Leader, and an active president of the Livermore Lithophiles, participating in Science Odyssey and Del Arroyo 4-H.

Lee is survived by his wife Heidi, his extraordinary children Joshua, David, and Sarah, his brothers, Jo and Pete, and his sister Cemantha, his nephew, nieces, and grandniece, and many cousins. He is remembered as a supportive and loving husband and father, a passionate enthusiast of art and music, and as someone characterized by his deep sense of integrity, humility, and curiosity. He will be greatly missed by his family and friends.

A Funeral and Memorial service were held on September 11, 2024.

Donations can be made in Lee's name to the Lee Davisson Memorial Scholarship Fund at the Pedrozzi Foundation, Congregation Beth Emek, The ALS Network, Outward Bound, and The Nature Conservancy.