

# Stop & Reed

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San Joaquin Valley Chapter American Guild of Organists

*In Memoriam*  
*Richard O. Cencibaugh*  
*March 11, 1937-April 3, 2020*



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# Mr. Pipe Organ

Richard Oliver Cencibaugh was born March 11, 1937 in Fresno, California to Oliver (O.B.) and Lois Cencibaugh. He was raised in Easton in Fresno County. Dick began his career as an organist by playing for the evening services at Easton Presbyterian Church when he was around the age of 12. He graduated from Washington Union High School in 1955. Dick served in the Army and was stationed in Germany. He was the organist for the base chapel. Dick graduated from Fresno State College. On February 12, 1977 he and Nancy were married. The Cencibaugh family included their three children, Vera, Matthew and Stephanie.

Dick was the organist at many of the Fresno churches, including First Congregational Church of Fresno, First Armenian Presbyterian Church, Fresno and University Presbyterian Church, Fresno. He was also known as an organ teacher to many of Fresno's organ students, as well as a student himself. His most notable teacher was Richard Purvis of Grace Cathedral fame. Dick was also one of the featured organists at Pizza and Pipes in Fresno where he played the Wurlitzer Theatre organ. His most recent theatre organ position was as Staff Organist at the Warnors Theater in Fresno where he played before the movies and during intermission and after on the four manual Robert Morton Theatre Organ. Besides playing the organ he had the rare talent of maintaining and tuning pipe organs. Those who knew him were constantly amazed at his encyclopedic knowledge of organs throughout the world. Ask him a question about an organ, and he would instantly tell you the builder, number of ranks and manuals, and he probably knew who the organist was.

Mr. Cencibaugh was a true friend to the organ community. He gave of himself tirelessly in the service of his fellow organists and churches. Dick received the Fresno Arts Council Horizon Award-Citizen Award in 2012. His service to the San Joaquin Valley Chapter of the American Guild of Organists will long be remembered, and certainly missed. He served as the chapter Dean from 1968-1970, and remained as Education Coordinator and board member for many years.

Due to the pandemic, services will be held at a later date. As soon as the details are known they will be sent to chapter members and friends.

## *Dean's memories*

My first encounter with Richard, of course, was at Warnor's Theatre. It was my first year in Fresno and I found myself riding the FAX bus to downtown Fresno for an AGO event. After a few hours on the bus (I didn't realize you are supposed to change busses, I'm from the country folks!) I arrived at Warnor's early and walked into the darkened lobby. I peeked in the theatre with amazement as Richard arose out of the pit playing "Everything's Coming Up Roses" on the great Robert Morton. That first impression and meeting truly changed my life. While the 10 years that I knew Richard is short compared to the friendships many of my colleagues have had, the impact was great ("swell, and sometimes positiv" as he would say). I know that we all miss his wisdom and wit. There wasn't a conversation with Richard that went by without some pun or gentle tease. His contribution to the organ and music world blankets many corners of our Valley and beyond. Richard's memory will live on through all of us as we continue to share his passion and the many things he taught us.

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**Cactus Sam Harris**

# Memories

Dick Cencibaugh was a great person. As a beginning organist I couldn't have asked for a more patient, knowledgeable, or personable teacher. Always a quick wit, he kept the pace lively while never losing focus.

A true gem in our midst has gone on to his great reward, and we honor him in our dedication to the art. RIP

-Peggy Copp

Organs and Richard Cencibaugh have long been synonymous. He was in high school when I first heard him give a recital at the Easton Presbyterian Church, his home church. He was truly gifted with a love of the organ. He was always ready and willing to come to one's rescue with organ problems. When Hope Lutheran was building its new sanctuary in 1979-80, the fear was how our little electronic organ would be able to lead singing in the large new sanctuary. I think it is fair to say that Richard loved such challenges. With placement of added speakers our little organ did okay until we bought and installed the pipe organ. In all of those times Richard was there working and guiding. His days and nights spent at Warnors Theater playing for the silent movies was known far and wide. Bus loads of enthusiasts would come late at night after the theater closed to hear Richard as he rose up out of the theater basement giving an exciting accompaniment to the movie being shown. Then came "Pizza and Pipes" to Fresno which afforded Richard a wonderful venue for the organ lovers who also loved pizzas. So sorry that did not last. Throughout all of time he was organist at various churches, both as regular organist or substituting for others in times of need. I believe he knew and was capable of playing as well as telling anyone about every church organ not just in Fresno but up and down California. He was able to fix most problems and if not he knew who to call for help. He was a very kind and generous man and will truly be missed.

-Ruth Andersen



*Fresno Arts Council  
Horizon Award Citizen Award  
2012*

# Memories



*Fresno Arts Council Horizon Award Citizen  
Award Reception at Frank's Place*

What a talented, knowledgeable, friendly, delightful person Richard was! He was always there to help when the need arose. He came to help install and program the organ at the Lutheran church in Caruthers. Feeling so honored to have the talented organist that played for "Pizza and Pipes" come out to help us was a very special day for me. He also loved to talk about eating aebleskivers at the fair!

His knowledge, love for and exceptional ability to play the organ will surely be missed by us all.

-Sharon Massingill

As a young organist, barely tall enough to reach the pedals, I have fond memories of Mr. Cencibaugh taking groups of us students around town to visit different organs. His patience, humor, and kindness were always present. When I was a little older I took some lessons with him, specifically to improve my service playing. I will always remember the creativity and thoughtfulness that he brought to hymn playing, and the way he encouraged me to just keep trying.

His enthusiasm for the instrument was contagious and I know his influence will live on.

Peace,

Joy-Leilani Garbutt



# Memories

My Friend, Richard (Dick) Cencibaugh “Seated one day at the organ.....” There are so many of these days I am remembering.

Richard - as popular organist at “Pizza and Pipes,” lifting the spirits of all hungry souls, who delighted in improvised, singable songs. We sang along, we ate, and we marveled at his changing of keys and all that “fancy stuff.”

Richard - as church organist - always getting “into” the hymns, nailing it on the preludes, offertories, and postludes. This organist was the ultimate church musician.

Richard - as master of the 4 manual, 14 rank Morton theatre pipe organ at Warnors Theatre. He was so good at rising from below the stage and playing his heart out. At the AGO “Organ Spectacular” events we were treated to orchestral, classical and pop music. The students (and some of us friends) who were coached by Richard were in awe of the sounds. And those who attended silent movies accompanied by Richard, or any special event (like playing with a military band!) were always impressed! I even had a “lesson” with him at the Warnors organ on my birthday, a surprise arranged by my husband.

Richard - as Dean of the San Joaquin Valley Chapter, AGO, Education Coordinator and Board Member. Meetings were enhanced by his ideas, perspectives and carry-through. Especially memorable was the Organ Crawl to Bakersfield that he planned. We were enthralled with his playing at the 4 manual Aeolian Skinner at Olive Drive Church.

Richard - as a participant in our annual Sing-Along Hymn Festivals. He was especially active from 2007 to 2016, leading out on the hymns of the church such as: “Praise to the Lord, the Almighty,” “To God Be the Glory,” “What a Fellowship,” “Wonderful Grace of Jesus,” among many others.

Richard - as a helpful friend. He was always willing to coach me at an organ that I knew nothing about - showing up when I needed the help. I value the “lessons” when he shared about intricacies of each organ, registration, anything I needed to be on top of what I was playing. I value his friendship, his sense of humor, his expertise, and his musicianship. Rest in Peace.

Catherine Walker  
April 6, 2020

Dick, Nancy and Matthew came to our home for dinner, and one item I served was deviled eggs. This happened to be one of Matthew's favorites. I then used to drop off deviled eggs for Matthew. We lived next door to his relatives so we forged a great friendship and enjoyed playing the organ/piano. We would come to Organ Board meetings together and enjoy conversations. To me, he was the *Mr. Pipe Organ!*

Helga F. Lutke Medd

# Memories



*Working on the Robert Morton wind supply at the Warnors Theater*

My best memories of Dick were working together on many of the pipe organs in the valley. The first one that we worked on together was the Warnors Theater Robert Morton. Someone had spilled a Coke onto the console and several keys were sticking. After getting that problem fixed Dick gave me a grand tour of the entire organ. We were to spend many hours afterward working on some of the problems of an organ with close to 90 years of service. I don't remember how many times we had to reseat the tongue on the bottom two notes of the 16' Tuba. The resonator had to be lifted off of the shallot, which was no easy task given its weight and not much room to maneuver, and the tongue reset. It usually took at least two attempts to get it seated correctly. But, there was always lunch afterwards which was Dick's treat. We spent quality time at Fresno Pacific, Trinity Lutheran, Pilgrim Armenian Congregational, Central Valley SDA, Newman Center, a couple of organs in Visalia and maybe some others that I don't remember.

I always enjoyed the time spent working with Dick. He was a great technician, teacher, musician and most important, he was a genuine friend. I miss him greatly.

Michael Varlas

Richard entered my pipe organ orbit way back in the 1970's when I was the chair of a committee put in place to investigate a new pipe organ for the Kingsburg Methodist Church. Richard was the current Dean of the SJV/AGO. Through his contact and also my contact with Esther Frankian, (my organ teacher) I began my education and career as an organist. Over the years, Richard was always my "go to" to get help with organ maintenance issues, tuning, etc. and he would direct me to the appropriate person, which often was him.

And of course, one of my favorite stories to tell is about how, in 1981, we drove to Paradise CA to disassemble a 7 rank organ (Celian Stewart Opus 1), take it apart, pack the truck, and drive back to Fresno, all in the time frame of 28 hours! It was reassembled and playing in about 4 weeks.

Richard's passion for the organ---playing, building, encouraging others, was always with humbleness and with a smile on his face. He will be missed by all who knew him.

Soli Deo Gloria!

Faye DeLong

# Memories

My first glimpse of Richard was the top of his head, sometime in the 1960s, as the lights went on for intermission at Warnor's theatre. There was such a mighty swell of sound, unlike any I'd ever experienced. Amid flashing lights he gradually rose. His hands and feet were a blur of non-stop motion, playing flashy Pop tunes on many keyboards. Wow! For me it was a wild introduction to the theatre organ by a magical musician who later became a fun and familiar colleague.

Richard graciously hosted many memorable AGO events for our chapter in his home. I especially remember Esther Frankian trying to prepare her tasty rice pilaf in his kitchen with Richard's teasing in the background.

As our Education Councillor over many years, Richard generously gave his time to prepare many Chapter members in the examination process of AGO certification. He handled all the necessary details from start to finish, all behind-the-scenes, unnoticed work that led to successful completion of certificates in a calm atmosphere.

Richard was always very generous to offer help in any organ project. Not only did he secure the Moore Memorial Theatre Organ for Fresno Pacific University, but helped see its success at all subsequent performances. He gave extra hours of his time and unmatched expertise in tuning, repairing, etc.

Just a few years ago, it was a joy to see the "king" of the Warnor's organ introduce young children to such a special instrument and watch each excited novice ride up to play their piece in that hallowed space. It was this same man I had seen decades ago, now sharing that same bench with a new generation.

Laurell Huber

Richard has been someplace in my memory for over sixty years. First as a student organist in Fresno, then as salesman with him at Stephenson-Bradford Music. Even the past twenty years since we moved from California there has been intermittent contact with him, one conversation being about the Morton organ at Boise's Egyptian Theatre. Richard is one of those persons you wish would just live among us forever.

Michael Civiello

Thank you for letting me know. Richard was a treasure. I will miss him. I let people at our church know. Richard built our organ and maintained it for years. He was a special guy.

Juanita Owens

# Memories

My friendship with Dick Cencibaugh began 40 years ago when I began studying organ with him. Lessons with Dick were intense, full of content and required concentration from beginning to end. I had been playing church services for awhile, but his teaching took me to “the next level.”

I had a BA in Piano from CSUFresno where I studied with some fine teachers, and learned many compositions of J.S. Bach. But studying the organ works of Bach with Dick opened another dimension for me. I learned about the subtleties of articulation and phrasing required in the performance of Bach on the organ. I learned about registration and technique and how to survive in church work.

After two years the lessons ended when I became a mother, but the lessons “stuck with me.” Dick was always available whenever I had a question or needed help. He encouraged me to stretch and grow; to become more than I thought I could be. He was my teacher, my mentor and my friend.

Michal Hembd  
 Director of Music Ministry  
 Redeemer Lutheran Church  
 Fresno, California

We are very grateful that we were able to have had the privilege of having Dick be the organist at First Armenian Presbyterian Church. He was such a dear man and we thoroughly enjoyed having him and his lovely wife at our church on Sundays. As everyone knows, Dick was an outstanding organist and so very kind and encouraging to young musicians. One young musician to whom he was a great encouragement was our son, Aris, who plays violin. Aris had the great privilege of being able to rehearse with and perform in church with Dick on the organ. Each encounter with Dick was magical. Dick would play his part effortlessly and perfectly, teaching our son musical concepts and techniques as they rehearsed together and enabling Aris to play his very best on the violin. Our son was fascinated with the organ and in awe of how Dick would masterfully play. When they got together Dick would play an assortment of music for him to show him the many facets of the instrument, while telling a number of musical jokes. Our son always was excited when Dick would ask him to play something for a Sunday service with him and he looked forward to rehearsing and playing with Dick every time. We miss Dick greatly and are looking forward to being reunited one day in heaven with him. We can picture Dick now playing beautifully on an organ, worshipping the Lord he loves so much!

Thank you!

Barbara Howsepian



# Memories

Dear Precious Family and Friends of our wonderful Richard,

We honor with all of you, your dear Richard. What a wonderful gift of love he was to all of us. Richard filled our lives with jovial smiles, a twinkle in his eyes, humorous and serious conversation, to name a few . . .

but particularly knowledge on the Art of The King of Instruments. Every conceivable nuance of the Organ and it's complexities were challenges to him and he met every one of them. And through our friend, he answered our questions, made the answers attainable and provided a model of excellence that we could all look up to and found joy as we shared in the gift and ministry of music, whether contemporary or classical. May we always have beautiful memories of your treasured family member and our friend, who was a gift from God and served Him faithfully.

On a personal note, memories of Richard's giving me pointers on organ registrations, suggestions of repertoire, and just visiting about this or that come to mind as I remember our friendship through the years. I was in awe of his accomplishments musically, yet he was always down to earth, as we shared the gift of music. When our son married, I immediately asked Richard if he would be the organist for the ceremony. I knew God had planned it just so, as there was only one weekend in July 2003 that wasn't taken in Richard's schedule. That was the weekend they planned to get married. So everything worked out great. Everyone was treated to a musical extravaganza by Richard, from Purcell to Mozart and Buxtehude. It was classic, and he made the day so special for all of us.

I offer this remembrance of Richard, who delighted the community with His virtuosity on the organ and who benefited our AGO chapter with his expertise and knowledge, and who, for myself, is a forever friend.

With love and sympathy,

Susan and Ken Berg

# Memories



*From Depths of Woe, I CLIMB  
to Thee....*

*Sorry... Dick would have probably said it!!*

# The Throne is Empty

