

ADVERTISEMENT

CALIFORNIA

## His long wonderful life is an inspiration, but aging means compromise, and it's expensive



Morrie Markoff and his family celebrating his 109th birthday in downtown Los Angeles. (Steve Lopez / Los Angeles Times)

BY STEVE LOPEZ | COLUMNIST

JAN. 22, 2023 5 AM PT



Morrie Markoff didn't respond right away when I emailed him recently, which made me worry a bit. So, I reached out to his son, Steve Markoff, who reassured me that his father was fine.

And about to celebrate his 109<sup>th</sup> birthday.

"He is amazing," Steve said. "He watches CNN, and we talk politics. He has a solid grasp of what is going on."

I met Morrie a decade ago, when he sent an email inviting me to have a cup of coffee with him at the L.A. Department of Water and Power cafeteria across the street from his downtown condo. Since then, we've stayed in touch and he's been busy.

At 100, the retired machinist and appliance repairman had his first art show when a gallery owner discovered his collection of scrap metal sculpture. At 103, he finished a memoir titled “Keep Breathing,” his answer to anyone who asked him the secret to a long life.

ADVERTISING



Morrie is a shot of inspiration for me, and for anyone who wants to believe it’s possible to keep pushing back against the inevitable. But at the same time, I don’t know if I’d have the courage or desire to last into triple digits. The privilege of aging does not come without compromise and loss, and I doubt I’d be very good at either.

## GOLDEN STATE

California is about to be hit by an aging population wave, and Steve Lopez is riding it. His new column will focus on the blessings and burdens of advancing age — and how some folks are challenging the stigma associated with older adults.

[Read his other columns](#)

UCLA psychologist Stephen Sideroff says that as the population of aging people swells, we’d do well to consider how we live in addition to how long we live.

“We don’t want to simply extend old age if it means more years of disability and dementia,” Sideroff said. “Increasing one’s health span, unlike life span, means staying healthy and functioning ... as long as possible, and reducing the time at the end of life where you are disabled in one way or another.”

Morrie is blessedly beating the odds, still relatively healthy and sharp. But the man who used to enjoy world travel and touring Los Angeles, by bus and on foot, has physical limitations now. He’s lost much of his hearing and has around -the-clock care from a team of aides.

Steve, who is approaching 80, and his sister Judith Hansen, 81, watch their father turn the pages of yet another calendar and find themselves reflecting on their own longevity, quality of life, and the costs of growing old.

“When you see someone you know and love getting old, and you see what’s happening to them, that opens up discussions I’m having with people my age and older,” Steve said. His own short-term memory isn’t what it used to be, Steve told me, and he’s dealing with prostate health issues, like so many men his age.

Even for those who live a healthful lifestyle, luck is key and decline is guaranteed as you age, and Steve finds himself reflecting on the nonnegotiable nature of mortality.

“An important topic everyone wants to shove under the rug is the cost of keeping somebody alive,” he said. “And do they really want to live?”

Morrie certainly does, and luckily he saved and invested well, and an inheritance helped pad the retirement fund. That’s a good thing because his in-home care costs roughly \$14,000 a month, Judy said. At that price, most retirees won’t have enough money to get them to 89, let alone 109. So where will they go, and who will care for them?

“There are so many parts to this whole thing of getting old,” said Judith, who lives in Seattle. “I don’t want to have to depend on someone 24/7. What I want is some sort

of group living ... where everyone is connected somehow.” ”

Steve, who lives on the Westside and visits his father once a week, has a similar view.

“Do I want to live like Dad, who’s kind of trapped in his condo? I don’t know,” he said. “I might rather be in a place where a bunch of other people are living, even though a lot of them would be dying every day.”

Morrie used to live in a nursing facility in Silver Lake, along with his wife, Betty, who died in September of 2019 at the age of 103. Then came COVID, and Steve and Judith pulled Morrie out when the virus tore through the facility, killing a number of residents.

But Morrie, a New York native, just keeps adapting to change, and even embracing it. The world, in all its madness and glory, fascinates and infuriates him, just as it always has. He gets up in the morning and reads the L.A. Times, and later in the day he watches the news on television.

“He’s thinking all the time,” Judith said.

And often writing down whatever pops into his head. A couple of years ago, when I told Morrie I was writing a book about aging and retirement and asked for his thoughts, he said he’d prefer to answer by letter. Not long thereafter, a fat envelope arrived at my house. Inside I found three separate, folded handwritten letters answering my questions.

“He has this intense curiosity about everything, and to me, that’s what keeps him going,” Steve said.

During Steve’s weekly visits, the routine was for Morrie to hand over his writings and Steve would have them typed up and added to Morrie’s blog, which covered everything from a fond memory of a favorite waitress at Canter’s Deli to a withering indictment of Vladimir Putin. A former caretaker once told me Morrie was up in the middle of the night, writing about the George Floyd murder.

“One day I picked up 42 handwritten yellow pages from the previous seven days,” Steve said. “In handwriting you could actually read.”

Steve noted that Morrie is writing less often of late, and he’s a bit concerned about that. But when I dropped by Morrie’s 109<sup>th</sup> birthday party on Jan. 11, he looked pretty much like the guy I had last seen at his 108<sup>th</sup> birthday party.

Morrie wears headphones, and I spoke into a microphone so he could hear me. I congratulated him and we caught up on mutual friends — this and that. He took my hand in his — it was a good solid squeeze — and introduced me to his caretaker, Rosario “Charito” Reyes.

“His level of coping with frustration in the face of life events is enormous,” Reyes said. “He enjoys every breath.”

Steve and his wife, Jadwiga, were at the party, along with Morrie’s granddaughter Ellen and grandson Chris. The family held up gold balloons in the shape of a 1, 0 and 9. They posed for pictures with the blue-eyed birthday boy, who smiled and gave a thumbs up.

Before he’d finished his lunch, Morrie wanted to get to the main event. Reyes helped him grab hold of his walker, and Morrie had the gang fall behind him in a conga line. He circled the table counting out the rhythm — one, two, three, with a kick of the left foot. One, two, three, with a kick of the right foot.

Steve later told me his father is not inclined toward philosophical conversations about aging. He is more comfortable polishing a memory, offering an unvarnished opinion on the news of the day, or penning a poem to Betty as if to prove that absence truly does make the heart grow fonder.

I took a spin through Morrie’s recent blog posts and found both a celebration of life and a nod to mortality. After he’s departed, he says in one, “Don’t cry for me. I’ve had a full life.” In another he says, “I hope in the next life I have the same family.”

Last August, he wrote this:

“As a practical, man, I know at the age of this writing, 108, I don’t have far to go.

“Like Betty, I hope to leave this world with a smile on my face.

“My daughter Judy says, ‘Dad, you’ve lived some life.’

“I sure have.

“Like it or not.

“I will leave footprints in the shifting sands of time.

“Millions have done so before me.

“Good luck.

“Morrie.”

*steve.lopez@latimes.com*

CALIFORNIA

LIFESTYLE

HEALTH & WELLNESS



### The stories shaping California

Get up to speed with our Essential California newsletter, sent six days a week.

SIGN ME UP

You may occasionally receive promotional content from the Los Angeles Times.



Steve Lopez



Twitter



Instagram



Email



Facebook

Steve Lopez is a California native who has been a Los Angeles Times columnist since 2001. He has won more than a dozen national journalism awards and is a four-time Pulitzer finalist. Lopez is the author most recently of “Independence Day: What I Learned About Retirement, From Some Who’ve Done It and Some Who Never Will.” His book “The Soloist,” inspired by his columns on his relationship with a Juilliard-trained homeless person, was a Los Angeles Times and New York Times best-seller, winner of the PEN USA Literary Award for Non-Fiction, and the subject of a Dream Works movie by the same name. He has also written three novels and two column collections.

#### SUBSCRIBERS ARE READING



CALIFORNIA

**Gunman still on the loose after 10 killed in mass shooting in Monterey Park dance studio**



CLIMATE & ENVIRONMENT

[FOR SUBSCRIBERS](#)

**Want to solve climate change? This California farm kingdom holds a key**



CALIFORNIA

Environmental rules stoke anger as California lets precious stormwater wash out to sea



UCLA SPORTS

No. 5 UCLA finds a way to hold off Arizona State, extends win streak to 14

---

**SUBSCRIBERS ARE READING** >

HOUSING & HOMELESSNESS

A powerful nonprofit owns apartments for poor tenants. Why are some tenants trapped in their rooms?

FOOD

Konbi, home to the best egg salad sandwich in L.A., to close both locations

MUSIC

David Crosby: 12 essential songs

---

**LATEST CALIFORNIA** >

CALIFORNIA

Terror at Monterey Park dance studio: What we know about mass shooting

1 hour ago

CALIFORNIA

Fewer Medi-Cal patients got crucial treatment for hepatitis C amid pandemic

Jan. 22, 2023

CALIFORNIA

'I am afraid to live here': How a massacre in a small California town named Goshen shocked the country

Jan. 22, 2023

CALIFORNIA

Voters turn sharply against Kevin de León, favor recall, poll finds

Jan. 22, 2023

CALIFORNIA

Teen boy in critical condition, two men injured after shooting at Long Beach park

Jan. 21, 2023

---

A **California Times** Publication

Subscribe for unlimited access

Follow Us



eNewspaper

Coupons

Find/Post Jobs

Place an Ad

Media Kit: Why the L. A.  
Times?

Bestcovery

Crossword

Obituaries

Recipes

L.A. Times Compare

L.A. Times Store

Wine Club

About/Contact

For the Record

L.A. Times Careers

Manage Subscription

Reprints and Permissions

Site Map