

Morrie Markoff, listed as oldest man in the U.S., dies at 110

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Morrie Markoff, a supercentenarian blogger and scrap-metal sculptor who was believed to be the oldest man in the United States and whose brain has been donated for research on what is known as super-aging, died June 3 at his home in downtown Los Angeles. He was 110.

He had two strokes in recent weeks, his daughter, Judith Markoff Hansen, said in confirming his death.

People who live to be 110 or older are considered supercentenarians, and the Gerontology Research Group, in Los Angeles, lists more than 150 of them around the world.

Markoff, who was born in New York City on Jan. 11, 1914, six months before World War I began, joined the club this year and was regarded as the oldest living man in the United States after the death in January of Francis Zouein, at 113, in California.

As of April, the oldest living man in the world is believed to be John Alfred Tinniswood, of England, at 111, according to Guinness World Records. (Guinness lists María Branyas Morera, a California native who lives in Spain, as the oldest woman in the world, at 117.)

When Markoff heard the news of his rise to the top of the list, “He just smiled and said, ‘Well, someone’s got to be there,’” his daughter said in an interview.

He was notable not only for his longevity but also for his unusual lucidity for his age. Up to his final months, he pored over The Los Angeles Times every morning, discussed the war in Ukraine and other world events and posted dispatches about his life on his blog.

“He believed that if he kept active, he would live, and he really wanted to live,” Hansen said.

Markoff soared over the bar of what researchers designate a super-ager — a person over 80 whose brain seems decades younger. And that made his brain highly valuable to research, said Tish Hevel, CEO of the Brain Donor Project, a nonprofit in Naples, Florida, that is affiliated with the National Institutes of Health.

“There is a critical need for this tissue for neuroscience research,” Hevel said. “One in five of us now has some kind of neurological disease or disorder, so many of which develop late in life. Scientists stand to learn so much from Mr. Markoff’s tissue about remaining healthy far into old age. It is an incredible gift he gives us.”

Morris Markoff was born in an East Harlem tenement, one of four children of Max and Rose Markoff, Jewish immigrants from Russia. His father was a cabinet maker. His mother “was a peddler selling kitchen stuff,” Markoff once said in an interview posted on his blog.

His boyhood family of six shared a 400-square-foot apartment that had no closets, hot water or toilet (they used one in the hall) and was infested with vermin and bedbugs. “The burning of bed springs was a yearly ritual among tenement dwellers,” he wrote in a 2017 autobiography, “Keep Breathing: Recollections From a 103-Year-Old.”

He overcame infection during the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic, which claimed the life of a brother. He remained in school through the eighth grade before training as a machinist.

In the late 1930s, Markoff moved to Los Angeles to take a job with a vacuum cleaner company. He arranged for his girlfriend, Betty Goldmintz, to move from New York, and the couple married Nov. 4, 1938. They remained together for 81 years, until her death in 2019.

Markoff later took a new job with the company in San Francisco but was transferred back to Los Angeles before World War II. In 1943, he worked as a machinist for a defense contractor that made artillery shells. After the war, he and a partner opened a series of small-appliance businesses in Los Angeles.

Markoff, a photography enthusiast, discovered a passion for sculpting while fixing a toilet in 1960; as he removed a broken copper float, he saw that it resembled a ballerina’s tutu, so he cut the float in half, soldered on some screening “and, ‘voilà,’ it was a ballet dancer raising one leg in a practice motion,” he wrote in his memoir. “I had created something.” He had his first gallery exhibition, in Los Angeles, at 100.

Markoff was only days from death and no longer lucid when his daughter decided that his brain should go to science; he had expressed support for organ donation, she said. It is believed to be the oldest cognitively healthy brain ever donated, Hevel said.

Markoff attributed his longevity to regular walking; he and his wife, who lived to 103, often completed 3 miles a day into their 90s, holding hands, they joked, “to keep themselves up,” his daughter said. He believed in eating simply, rarely drank alcohol and avoided water in plastic bottles.

“They believed those bottles were poison,” Hansen said. When public health concerns about some bottles began to arise, she added, “he called me and said: ‘J, did you read the newspaper? We were ahead of our time.’”

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