



## Gary R. Nickels

July 11, 1940 - November 3, 2022

Gary R. Nickels, 82, of Grand Island, died Thursday, November 3 in Rome, Italy. Gary's unexpected passing leaves a void in the hearts of all who knew him. He gave to others never expecting anything in return.

Gary was born July 11, 1940, in Santa Monica, California, the son of Henry and Jeanette (Currier) Nickels. He was raised by his father and grandmother Ana in Beatrice, Nebraska.

A 1958 graduate of Beatrice, NE High School, Gary attended Long Beach Community College in California for one year before returning to Nebraska to earn a bachelor's degree in Art, Science and English from Kearney State College. Gary later earned his master's degree in Art Education from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where he also served as an Assistant Professor of Art Education.

In 1963, Gary began his teaching career as an art teacher at Beatrice Public Schools while also working as a Park Ranger with Homestead National Monument. He later went on to work with the Nebraska Arts Council and National Endowment for the Arts as an Artist in Residence traveling the state. Gary was hired as the first art consultant for Grand Island Public Schools in 1977, working with the elementary schools. He was recognized as the recipient for the Nebraska Art Teacher's Supervision and Administration Award in 1990-1991 for his outstanding work. He became an Art Instructor at Grand Island Senior High where he was in charge of designing the new art department that included an art gallery. His career with GIPS spanned twenty-

four years. Gary retired in 2001. Following retirement, he took a position for one year as a Gifted Teacher at Saint Francis Indian School in South Dakota. While there, Gary immersed himself into the culture and quickly became highly respected by the Elders.

Gary married Sharil Ridgley in December 1959, in Pickrell, Nebraska. This union was blessed with two daughters, Dawn and Roxana. The family made their home in Beatrice.

Gary married Maureen Gaffney on March 29, 1980, in Grand Island. This union was blessed with daughter Chelsa (Bear).

In addition to teaching, Gary worked as a crop-hail adjuster, starting in the summer of 1980. Upon retirement from teaching Gary continued as an adjuster until his death. Gary was known to have served as one of the longest crop-hail adjusters in the nation, with farmers dubbing him "The Legend."

Gary was a man of many talents and accomplishments with a deep husky voice. He left his footprints in this world in so many ways. As a teacher, for those students that didn't have an adult in their life, Gary accepted them for who they were, and they knew Mr. Nickels was there for them.

He loved the great outdoors. He was quick to remind people: "My being surrounded by Mother Nature is where I'm most at peace. There's no better feeling than being out there with the sounds, smells and beauty that surround me". He cared deeply for the environment and all the animals and creatures that inhabited the earth. Years ago, he could be found at the State Fair milking rattlesnakes. His happiest moments were spent with his buddies – fishing in his bass boat, hunting for pheasants and quail, sitting in a tree with his bow & arrow waiting for that one big monster buck to come walking by or that wild turkey to appear when he called one in. He found great joy in perfecting his photography skills with his friend Paul Julian. Gary enjoyed printing and framing his own photos and loved giving his works of art to others to enjoy. The art gallery at CHI Good Samaritan in Kearney still has Gary's latest art exhibit up for patients and families to enjoy.

Gary was talented at silversmithing and goldsmithing and, early in his

teaching career, he learned how to blow glass. He loved working with clay and may best be remembered by his elementary students for the clay monster pots they created under his direction. Gary was an actor with the Piccadilly Dinner Theater in Grand Island. He performed with the Grand Island Little Theater alongside his daughter Bear.

Gary and Maureen enjoyed their many travel adventures they took over the years. He relished the time he and Bear took an adventure to Ecuador and Peru where they spent time living with the natives in the Rainforest.

Gary was a proud lifelong member of the Nebraska State Education Association and National Education Association.

Those left to cherish his memory best include his best friend and soulmate, Maureen Nickels; daughters, Dawn (Kenneth) Crosier of Beatrice, Roxana (Ron) Woolett of Fayetteville, North Carolina, and Chelsa-Bear (Joshua) Wright of Grand Island, brother, Skip (Kristina) Nickels of Charlotte, North Carolina; grandchildren: Kody, Keifer, Ana, Celeste, Vincent; great-granddaughter Olivia; brothers-in-law, Howard (Linda) Gaffney of Anselmo, Phil (Susan) Gaffney of Evans, Georgia and Robert (Sara) Gaffney of Apex, North Carolina and a host of nieces, nephews and wonderful friends.

He was preceded in death by his parents, Henry Nickels and Jeanette Neill, stepfather William Neill, stepmother Hazel Nickels and mother-in-law Angela Gaffney.

A Celebration of Life Service will be held Monday, November 21, 11 a.m. at Babel's Barn in Wood River. Reverend Paul Julian will officiate. Gary's family will be greeting friends an hour before service time. A luncheon will immediately follow the service. A private family graveside burial will be in the St. Anselm's Cemetery, Anselmo, Nebraska, on Saturday, November 19.

Memorials can be directed to the family for later designation or to the NSEA Children's Fund. All Faiths Funeral Home in Grand Island is entrusted with the arrangements.

# Previous Events

## Celebration of Life Service

NOV **21**. 11:00 AM.

Babel's Barn  
Wood River, NE

# Tribute Wall



“ Gary R. Nickels

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October 08, 2023 at 11:02 PM



“ My brother, Herb Weston, and I send our heartfelt sympathies to all Gary's friends and family. Gary was a good friend of our family from the early days, and a classmate of mine at Beatrice High (class of '58). Gary and my brother shared an abiding fascination with snakes, turtles--and all of nature. We were all enlightened when Gary shared lovely pictures of his dogs and his discoveries in the Nebraska landscape. Gary was a man of many talents, and I particularly admired his beautiful bird photography. I can only imagine what a fine teacher he was. The world is a bit duller and a lot emptier without Gary in it, but his spirit endures!  
Kathy Weston Cohen, Lincoln, NE

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**Kathy Weston Cohen** - November 20, 2022 at 12:46 PM

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“ Gary and I shared a VERY deep passion for NATURE! I too have a closer appreciation for God's creation through the lens of cameras, as he did.

*I first met Gary as a featured artist at Creative Arts Gallery in Beatrice.*

*His talents have influenced thousands of people through his experience and knowledge of our environment that God has blessed us with!*

*My deepest condolences to Gary's family and his many many friends that he has truly HEART touched.*

*Norm Nicholson*

*Harbine, Nebraska.*

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**Norm Nicholson** - November 17, 2022 at 10:47 AM