



## Donald Jeffrey Nissen

May 15, 1963 - August 29, 2023

Donald Jeffrey Nissen was born on May 15, 1963 in Denver, Colorado. His parents were Walter and Mildred Nissen - he was the youngest of three boys - older brothers Phil and Jim Nissen. During his childhood he was an accomplished boy scout, raised with love and adventures. He graduated from South High School in 1981 in Denver, where he played competitive tennis, and received a B.A. in Art from Metropolitan State College in Denver in 1986 where he was involved in gaming, LARP-ing and being a devoted uncle to his many nieces and nephews.

While at Metro State, he met Laura in their shared art classes, and they began a courtship and a 40-year love story that resulted in their marriage in 1992. After spending a few years as a commercial artist (working both at the Denver Post and at CB Commercial Real Estate) Don was called to work in education like many in his family.

After a few years of marriage, Don became a father - to baby Harvey Grace Nissen. He was a devoted, creative and engaged papa in every sense of the word. He approached parenting with patience, kindness and extending the deepest sense of security and unconditional love. He was fiercely proud of and always excited about Harvey's evolution and maturity as they grew into a young adult.

Laura's work took the family to Portland, Oregon, and Don decided to pursue a Master's Degree in Education at Portland State University, specializing in Curriculum and Instruction to complete his career pivot. He joined the Eleanor

Roosevelt Elementary School family in 2003, and worked there teaching primarily 4th grade, until retiring in 2023. His attention and commitment, his sense of creativity and fun, and his dedication to his young students was well known. He took no greater delight than hearing from or running into a student years after they'd left Eleanor Roosevelt and hearing about their lives, and the Nissen family was present on more than one occasion when students told him he was a life-changing and favorite teacher. He was an active part of the larger school community and loved his colleagues, regularly sharing in their successes, struggles and lives.

The Nissen family (Don, Laura and Harvey) enjoyed many wonderful trips in the U.S. and abroad together - especially adventures in Canada, England, Ireland, Wales, Italy and his favorite, Scotland. There were also many camping trips and exploring of his home state of Colorado, and then all over the pacific northwest. He was an avid fisherman and reveled in finding the perfect fishing spot. High points of his life involved participating in family and school life (his own school and all things from the family's NE Portland neighborhood schools and every aspect of Harvey's growing up years - making so many friends along the way), connecting with his extended family through trips (especially his favorite Mountain Rendezvous excursions), woodworking, black powder shooting, planting trees and gardening. Along the way, Cohner Embree "joined" the Nissen family as a beloved son and Don reveled in being his "extra family and spare dad" in every sense of the word, living with the family while in college and continuing to participate in all kinds of family activities and holidays. His presence and love grew the family in so many beautiful ways.

In 2018, the Nissen family moved to Washougal, Washington where Don began to build his dream woodworking shop and a greenhouse to pursue his passions for unusual and rare plants, and explore the beauty of living outside a city. If you were ever lucky enough to be a guest in his greenhouse, you could feel the joy and excitement for which he approached the nurturing of tender things. He had just become involved in the Oregon Orchid Society and

had made plans to begin training as a master gardener and enjoyed making new plant-community friends. He reveled in the simple joys of sitting on the porch in the evenings listening to a chorus of owls, feeding deer (frequent at the family home) apples, and keeping many bird feeders full to enjoy the 100's of birds that he always attracted. Don remained an extremely engaged dad even as Harvey set out for their future career in graphic arts in LA and was deeply proud to see their success there in a special trip for Christmas last year. He prided himself on always being "a phone call away" and all other activities would stop if Harvey needed him for anything large or small. He was also thrilled to witness Cohner's growth, evolution and successes as he became a nurse and set out in a career in medicine and their frequent phone calls/visits enriched his life beyond measure. Don loved being a "good neighbor" and was blessed to make such good friends among those who lived around the family in Washougal, as well as throughout his life.

He was fiercely loyal and protective. Don was a generous, thoughtful, funny and warm husband who was eternally proud of supportive of his wife Laura's activities and supported her through any challenges. He was fiercely loyal, protective and generous. Since his passing, Laura has received numerous messages that among his retirement goals stated to friends, none was more important than simply spending more time together as a couple.

The last few years of Don's life presented some health challenges which he approached with his traditional good humor and determination to get better. Recent developments and prognosis all pointed to good health outcomes - and he'd begun to dream in real time of a wonderful retirement. He'd spent the entirety of his second day of retirement (his last day) sleeping in, snuggling with the family dog Birdie, blissfully working in his greenhouse, puttering around the family property in our little gator and planning a little salmon fishing adventure for the coming weekend. In short...it was a perfect Don day.

There is much gratitude that he had a couple of joyful weeks before this too - officiating at Cohner and Katie (Embree's) wedding, spending time with

Harvey who came in from LA, saying farewell to his much-loved Roosevelt Elementary School family and hanging out with friends enjoying life.

Those who loved him most are beyond grateful for the lifelong bright light, huge heart, snarky and delightful humor, and principled goodness that he was so well known for...and how lucky we feel to have all been part of his beautiful life. Don was a giant in so many ways and his absence is deeply felt by all who knew him. The "work of Don's life" was being teacher. Though there is great shock and sadness at his sudden passing, please join our family in celebrating his final lesson to us all - to embrace, celebrate and savor every moment of your life, to never miss a chance to extend your love out loud to those you care about, to laugh, and to bring gentleness, fairness, hope - and learning - in all spaces you can. Together, let's live a legacy of gratitude for the gifts of our life around us, and of love. There is no more fitting tribute.

Don is survived by his wife Laura Nissen (Washougal, WA), his adult children Harvey Nissen (Los Angeles, CA) and Cohner Embree (Vancouver, WA) and his new wife Katie, brothers/sisters in law Phil and Millie Nissen (Casper, WY) and Jim and Peggy Nissen (Moab, UT) and nieces/nephews Kiri Nissen, Susan Nissen Scott, Erin Nissen, Sena Nissen, and David Nissen, along with all of their children. He also leaves a huge circle of friends from across his life. A celebration of life ceremony will be held Saturday, December 2, 2023 at Evergreen Memorial Gardens at 3:00 p.m at 1101 NE 112th Avenue, Vancouver, WA 98684. A livestreaming option will be available for those who cannot attend in person. Please contact Laura at [nissen@pdx.edu](mailto:nissen@pdx.edu) for the link. If you would like to make a donation in memory of Don Nissen, here are some organizations that hold very special meaning. Or you may plant a tree and send Laura a picture.

PFLAG Portland <https://pflagpdx.org/>

Vancouver Public Schools Foundation (goes directly to kids and teachers) <https://foundationforvps.org/>

National Public Radio <https://www.opb.org/>



# Tribute Wall



“ 0 file added to the tribute wall

Evergreen Memorial Gardens - July 03, 2025 at 04:34 PM



“ 0 file added to the tribute wall

Evergreen Memorial Gardens - July 03, 2025 at 04:34 PM



“ Sending my love to Laura, Harvey, the Nissen family, and the countless many whose lives were blessed with Don's joy, kindness, and love.

Ridley - December 02, 2023 at 12:00 AM



“ The memorial was beautiful and inspiring. Sending our love to the Nissen family.

Stephanie and Julie - December 02, 2023 at 12:00 AM



“ Sending supportive thoughts from Texas,

Craig, Katy, Moth and Jill Hoffman - November 29, 2023 at 12:00 AM

DT

“ I was lucky enough to teach in the High-Cap program at Roosevelt Elementary with Don, and we worked across the hall from each other for my last few years of teaching. We'd usually chat before and/or after school, and he loved sharing his hobbies (shooting old guns, carving wooden spoons, all things to do with plants, camping and traveling, etc.). In all our conversations, though, Don's family was his favorite topic, and it was clear that Laura was the love of his life. He was a very special person and will be missed by everyone who knew him.

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**Diana Taylor-Williams** - November 29, 2023 at 12:00 AM

TF

“ With much love & Respect...

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**The Nair Family** - November 29, 2023 at 12:00 AM

VD

“ Don was so enjoyable to work with at Roosevelt. He was always warm, friendly, fun, and interesting. His students loved him. His last group of fourth graders really missed him when he took a leave. I heard many comments from them wondering when he was going to return. We all miss you, Don! The world is not the same.

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**Vicky Von Dier** - November 29, 2023 at 12:00 AM

TA

“ Planting this tree in honor of Don. May this tree stand tall and flourish. Please accept our heartfelt condolences.

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**Thet Mar & Aung** - November 28, 2023 at 12:00 AM

AN

“ Always in our heart

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**Anonymous** - November 26, 2023 at 12:00 AM

TM

“ I only knew Donald through Laura's posts/stories; his love for his family, friends, and students was obvious. My thoughts and prayers to his family.

Tito Mendoza - November 24, 2023 at 12:00 AM

CA

“ What a beautiful tribute to Don's memory in the telling of his remarkable life story and through the sharing of such precious photos. ❤️ Thank you, Laura, for sharing so much of your heart in putting all of this together. Our hearts go out to you and Harvey, and prayers of comfort, peace and remembrance are being lifted up for you. It is truly a blessing and honor to have known Don as a dear friend and colleague for so many years. He was such a treasured member of our Eleanor Roosevelt school family and his love and legacy will be felt in our hearts and school for all time to come. Our daughter, Allison, was so fortunate to have "Mr. Nissen" as her first grade teacher when he was first getting started at our school. Don shared so much of his heart and love with all of the students, families and staff around him. Don used his artistic talents to design an incredible mural that graces the main hallway in our school. He incorporated our school song into his design... "Eleanor Roosevelt's the school for me. This is the place I like to be!" Don's presence will always be felt there and in our hearts! ❤️  
With love, Corinne and Rich Vaughn and Allison Pulham

Corinne, Rich and Allison - November 14, 2023 at 12:00 AM

SH

“ Donald Jeffrey Nissen

Shea - October 26, 2023 at 12:00 AM

SH

“ Donald Jeffrey Nissen

Shea - October 26, 2023 at 12:00 AM

KS

“ Dear Laura My deepest condolences! I hope these trees spread the love/joy he brought into the world, with love, Kristin Schubert

Kristin Schubert - October 11, 2023 at 12:00 AM

LH

“ Don has joined the spirit world but his energy and his love live eternally. All my love to Laura and Harvey Grace. Chipisal'cho Don.

Lea Ann Holder - October 02, 2023 at 12:00 AM

DB

“ May he find love in the arms of his ancestors, as he was a good ancestor. Love to you Laura and Harvey. Chi hullo li.

Danica Brown - October 01, 2023 at 12:00 AM

NG

“ Laura...much love to you and your family.

Nancy Goldman - October 01, 2023 at 12:00 AM

SY

“ Laura, In your telling, Don touched so many people in such important ways. His legacy lives on. My deepest condolences for your loss.

Susan Yeres - October 01, 2023 at 12:00 AM

FO

“ *Donald Jeffrey Nissen*

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**Funeral Home Owner** - September 28, 2023 at 12:00 AM

KD

“ *What a motley crew we were back in the day at Roosevelt Elementary!! Boy did we have fun! Don was one of the leaders and a vital member of this dedicated group of educators. We all miss him dearly and will until we meet again.*

*With love,  
Your Red Wing friends*

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**Kathy Diez** - September 21, 2023 at 12:00 AM

AN

“ *We are deeply sorry for your loss ~ Evergreen Memorial Gardens Cemetery, Funeral Chapel and Crematory*

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**A Memorial Tree was planted for Donald Jeffrey Nissen** - September 01, 2023 at 12:00 AM