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Vagabond youth led Earth Day founder John McConnell to life of peace

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John McConnell spent his life encouraging harmony between mankind and nature.

He spread his unconditional love for everyone and everything by creating an international day of observance for the planet, Earth Day, in 1969. He died Saturday at a nursing home in Denver from complications of a heart condition. He was 97.

When McConnell founded Earth Day and his social-justice organization, World Equality Inc., in the 1960s, the ideas were still cutting-edge concepts.

Anna McConnell, 81, his wife of 44 years, said McConnell never stopped working for a future of universal peace, even after he lost his sight in 2006. Today, he is credited with spurring the modern environmental movement.

McConnell was raised with a broad sense of culture and empathy, which encouraged his magnetic, loving personality. His parents were devout Evangelicals and traveling missionaries who lived out of their van, Anna McConnell said. They were early contributors to the founding of the Assemblies of God Church.

McConnell spent most of his adolescence on the road, learning to read at libraries. He was the oldest of six children, born in Davis City, Iowa, in 1915. Constant exposure to new people and different ways of life ingrained an early predisposition for peace and unity in McConnell, who could not understand the value of war, Anna said.

Nonetheless, he served in the Merchant Marine during World War II to avoid anti-patriotic judgment and held ministry services for various vessels and warships.

He tried to keep his head down but was eventually drafted to the Army. There, he rejected rifle training, saying he saw the face of Jesus on the target, Anna recalled. He was sent to solitary confinement after refusing to stop protesting the war.

McConnell went AWOL and swore off supporting violence of any kind. He came up with Earth Day in 1968 and declared it to be on the vernal equinox, which is about March 20 or 21. Anna said he called the celebration a "global holiday" and designed the trademark Earth flag in 1969 as his symbol of universal inclusion to a universal priority.

Another Earth Day is celebrated April 22 because a Wisconsin senator at the time, Gaylord Nelson, wanted to promote an environmental teach-in and liked the name.

McConnell wouldn't join forces with the senator, and Anna said his religion forbade lawsuits, so he let it go and two days for the holiday were sanctioned.

In 1969, he developed the social-justice organization World Equality Inc., through which his long-held values of "unity in diversity" became an international proclamation.

He married Anna in Brooklyn on Christmas Day in 1967. They lived most of their lives in New York but moved to Denver in 2002 to be close to their only daughter, Christa Mason, and her family.

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