

Veteran protester learned activism in 60s California

Bob Leonard was born to conservative Republican parents in the United States. He sought a US Navy career but was turned down because of poor vision. He was a graduate of Berkeley and Yale and a research fellow with the National Science Foundation (NSF). Yet he became a leading peace, anti-nuclear and environmental activist in New Zealand.

Described by Ian Collins of Lincoln University, where he taught for 23 years, as a "complex character", Leonard became embroiled in and was profoundly moved by the 1960s protest scene in California. Moving to New Zealand in 1982, he became a familiar figure in newspaper and TV images of protest. He died this month, aged 74.

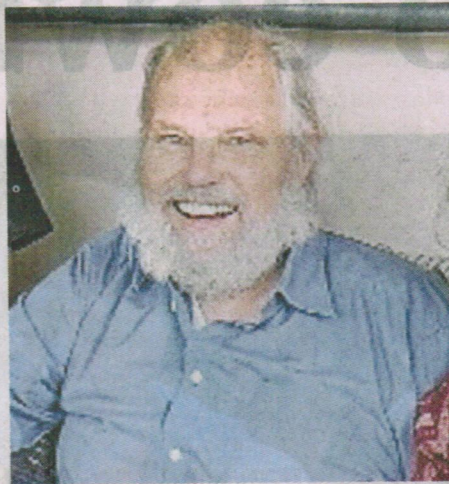
Leonard was born in Nevada but grew up in California. Graduating in forestry studies from Berkeley and Yale, he took up an NSF research fellowship in 1960.

That year he married Judi Hayden, a Democrat who persuaded him to change party allegiance. Their eight-year marriage produced three children.

Friend Murray Horton says Leonard looked back on 1960s California as "days of turmoil" that "changed his world outlook". His activism included protests against the building of a local nuclear power plant, radical anti-Vietnam War demonstrations and demands for better conditions for poor black communities.

Leonard began a two-year post-doctoral project in biochemistry at University of California, Davis, in 1969. By the time this was finished, his marriage was too. He moved to Lake Tahoe as field laboratory director, met Barbara Sloane and they married. They had one child and decided to migrate to New Zealand for their son's future.

"They were classic nuclear refugees," Horton says. Leonard told Horton they chose New Zealand out of high regard for Kiwi scientist Sir William Pickering, for whom his father had worked in California, low regard for Ronald Reagan, governor of California in the 1960s and by 1982 US president, whom he called "a clown", and for the country's reputation as "far-away, isolated, underpopulated and beautiful".



Nuclear refugee: Bob Leonard protested against nuclear power, the Vietnam War, and spy stations.

The family settled in Christchurch and bought a bach at Peel Forest, where Leonard planted many native trees. He began tutoring in soil science on the casual staff at Lincoln and, Collins says, was quickly "snapped up for a permanent academic position", as a lecturer in environmental science.

"He was passionate about stewardship of the environment (and) tenacious in his beliefs," Collins says. With Associate Professor Graeme Buchan he founded Lincoln's award-winning and internationally recognised EnviroSchool programme. He progressed to Head of Department of Soil and Physical Sciences and continued freshwater scientific research around the world. He retired in 2007.

Collins says Leonard was esteemed by his students for his lectures and laboratory classes, but never sought the limelight. In a telling gesture, former student and All Black captain Richie McCaw visited Leonard when he was ill in hospital.

Finding an American military base at Harewood appalled Leonard as much as finding an active anti-nuclear movement in the city delighted him. He became involved immediately. Having worked for the NSF in California, he knew about

its work in Antarctica and believed the Americans were using it as a cover for the extension of its global intelligence-gathering and military presence, in which Christchurch was a vital base. Much of his protest activity during his 30 years in Christchurch centred on the US base at Harewood.

Horton says Leonard became the "driving force" in moves to de-militarise Harewood. While failing in this aim, he believed demonstrations had limited American flights and expansion of their activities, while research by protest and peacemaking groups had exposed information the Americans had wanted kept secret.

In later years Leonard was prominent in protests against the Waihopai "spy station" near Blenheim, where he was once arrested. When three protesters appeared in court on charges relating to their trespassing and damaging of property on the Waihopai base, Leonard's expert affidavit proved critical in gaining their acquittals.

"He was a genuine (non-violent) warrior for peace," says Horton.

Leonard wrote submissions against the establishment of the Government Communications Security Bureau (GCSB). Horton says he showed prescience in predicting the service "would result in domestic spying". He involved himself also in environmental issues.

The many groups he joined and served would make an alphabet soup of acronyms. His 30 years of activism was a whirl of campaign actions, from sitting in front of logging trucks in a West Coast native forest, to appearing before select committees in Parliament. Serious health problems from the 1990s did not stop his activism. He made his last visit to Waihopai, in 2010, with the aid of two walking sticks. Leonard and his wife moved to Wellington after the earthquakes of 2011.

MIKE CREAM

» Robert Leslie Leonard, born Reno, Nevada, November 14, 1938; died Wellington, August 14, 2013. Survived by wife Barbara, sons Mark, Brendan and Graham, daughter Andra, and eight grandchildren