

## Remembering Michael: Family Stories

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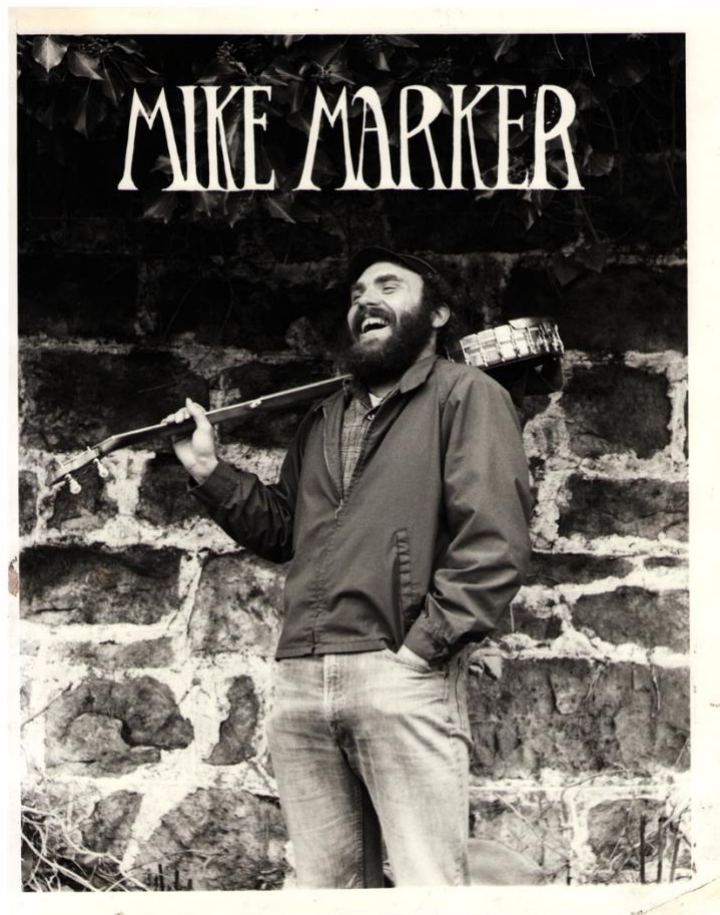
## Remembering Michael: Family Stories

Cecilia Morales

with Nakos Marker, Yonina Marker, and Miska Marker

A good friend took this photo (see Figure 1) of Mike (then age 33) while I kept an eye on traffic, as the spot we chose is on a main boulevard in Bellingham, Washington with not much shoulder space! The lettering imposed on the photo is Mike's own. This photo became the cover of a cassette album he recorded that year and represents his joyful spirit.

Figure 1. Photograph of Michael Marker, 1984, with his banjo, Bellingham, WA



Michael taught for a year in Juneau, Alaska in 1988 (see Figure 2). The stories that occurred that year of teaching could be written into a book. He only taught there for a year. It started with him

112

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being hired to teach in an “alternative program” for kids who were considered needing special attention. In reality, they were the Native Alaskan kids the school wanted out of the way. So, they gave Michael a room at the far end of the school building with the plaque “COSTUMES” on the front door. This room had been used for costume storage for the school drama program. It was small and had no windows.

Figure 2. Mr. Marker, teacher at Juneau-Douglas High School, 1988, Juneau Alaska



Michael got right to work. Juneau is not a big town; he had been up to tour Southeastern Alaska, playing gigs two or three times before and was well known in the music community there. He searched out and met with school board members and brought to their attention how the school

was marginalizing Native students. He demanded windows, and the administration reluctantly obliged. This all happened within the first month of our arrival. Then, once the windows were in, the assistant principal told Michael that they were going to move his class out to a classroom in a loft space over the auto and woodshop, in a metal pole building, because they needed the now windowed former costume room to use as a writing lab. Michael called for an OSHA [Occupational Safety and Health Administration] report.

It went on like this until Michael was eventually removed as a teacher and made a hall monitor. Instead of giving out detention slips, he gave out books he had bought from the Sally Ann second-hand store. As a result, he was given a new special assignment, to be a “personal friend” to a schizophrenic kid who would often freak out and need to leave the building. That kid ended up graduating from college, getting married, and kept in touch with Mike over the years.

By the end of the school year, the administration had not been able to fire Mike, so they had a hearing to try to prove that he was incompetent and thus end his teaching career. The Superintendent was unfairly determined to see Mike gone and told stories about him that weren’t true. The science teacher and union shop steward offered to represent Michael against the president of the school board, who was also a hotshot lawyer in Juneau. During the three days of hearings and testimony, one witness on the superintendent’s side blatantly lied. The science teacher representing Michael broke down sobbing and eloquently stated to the board that Michael was leaving to go back to Bellingham, was that not enough? Why try to destroy his teaching career?

They did not listen, and when we returned to Bellingham that summer, Michael enrolled at Western Washington University to try to undo some of the damage. That following fall, he was out at Lummi talking to some Lummi educators and was hired to start a high school on the campus of Northwest Indian College. He and a Lummi educator drove around in an old truck visiting families to get enough momentum to get the school off the ground. Mike, along with a handful of Lummi educators, started the high school, and Mike became the head teacher. It was a success, and by the end of the first year, he received a plaque that read “Teacher of the Year.” He brought the plaque home, and with that unique chuckle of his, he looked at me and asked, “Well Chica, which is it, am I incompetent, or teacher of the year?” Mike loved a good dialectic, and we had a good laugh.

Figure 3, Figure 4, and Figure 5 are pages excerpted from *Papa’s Clubhouse College for Kids: Winter Term Offerings*. This is a special document written and drawn up by Michael. We homeschooled our first two kids, and when they were around 9 and 13, I asked Michael to help out in our schooling venture. He wanted to spend more time with them, and I needed him to help me with the subjects of science and art, in particular. Science and art also happened to be two of his favorite subjects, along with history! As was Michael’s style, he decided to put together *Papa’s Clubhouse College for Kids (P.C.C.K.)*, which was his idea of what a College for Kids should be. The excerpts give a sense of what he wrote up, along with wacky drawings on multiple types of paper.



Figure 3. Opening Pages of *Papa's Clubhouse College for Kids: Winter Course Offerings*

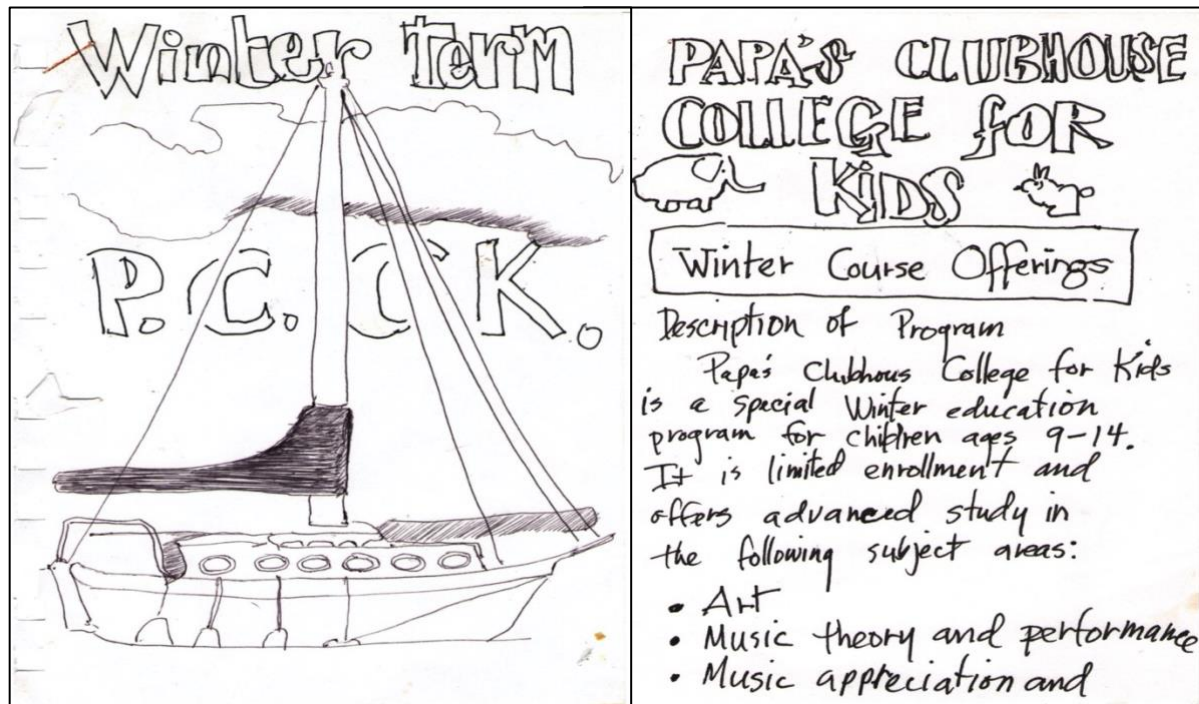


Figure 4. P.C.C.K. Courses: Art and Dance, Silly Pictures 102, Ice Cream 103

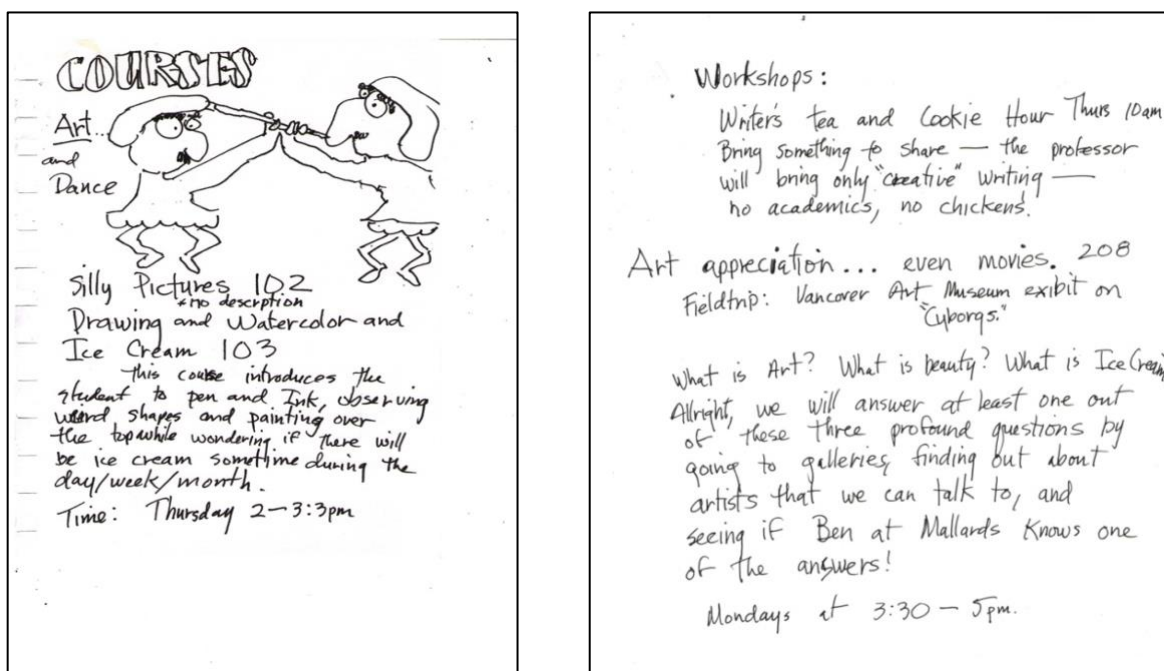


Figure 5. P.C.C.K. Courses: *Newton on Rollerblades* 103; *Blow It Up, Clean It Up* 104; *Shock and Talk* 105; *Media and Theatre: Silly Shakespeare* 204

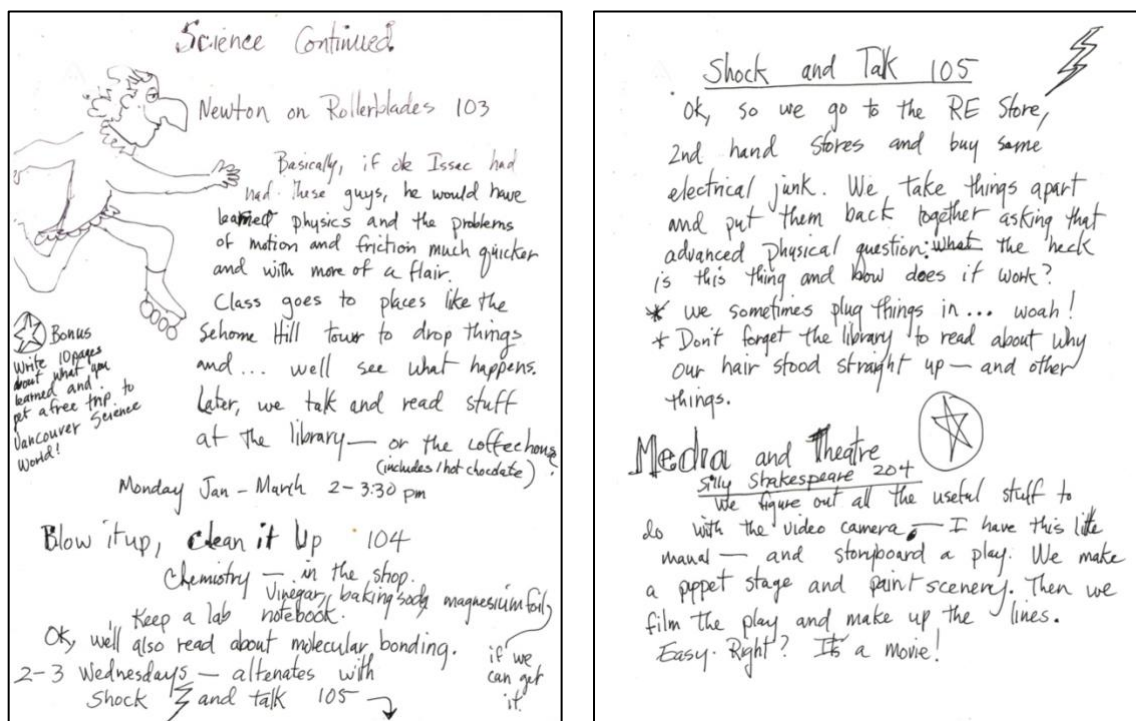
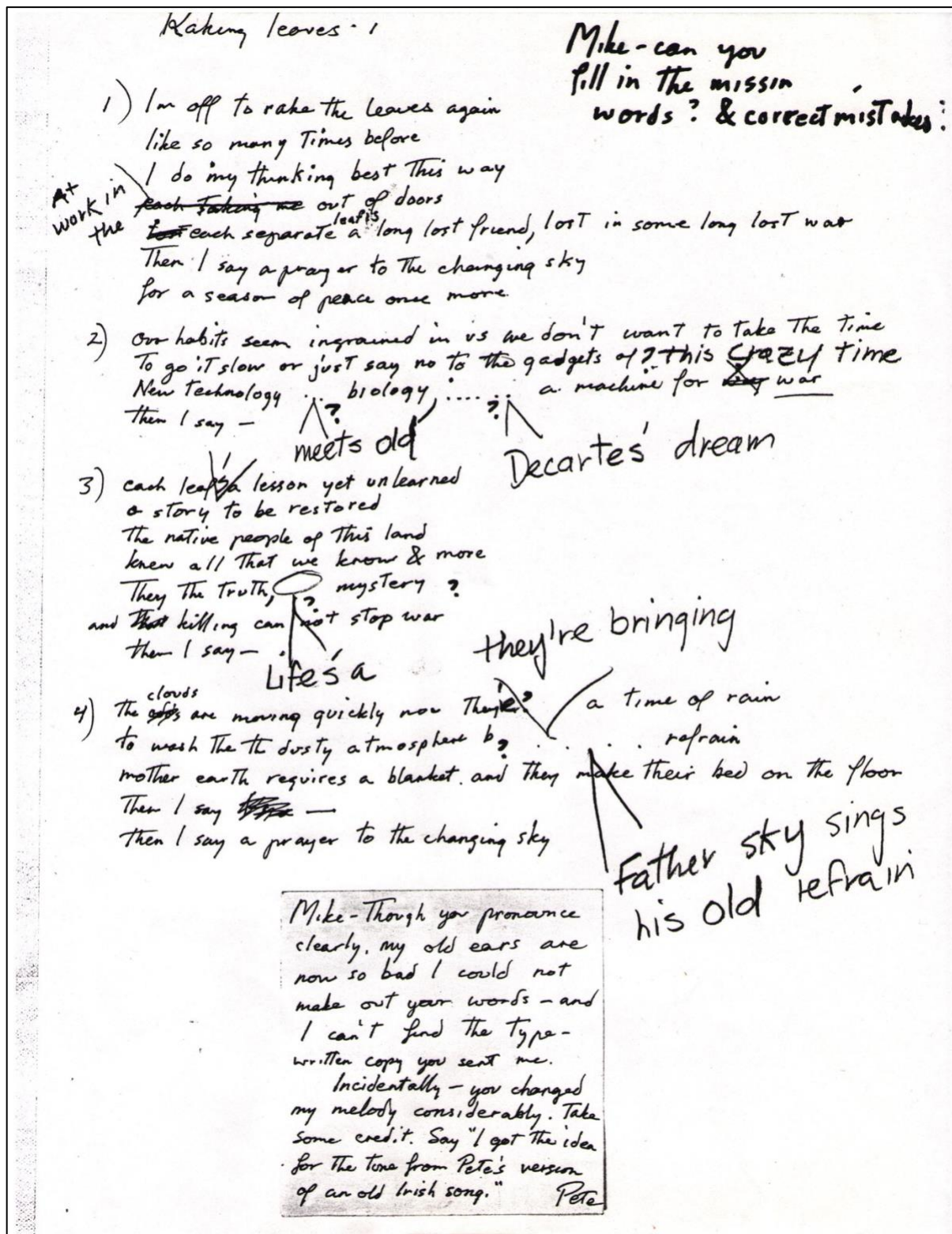


Figure 6 shows the lyrics to a song in progress, “Raking Leaves.” Michael wrote this song in collaboration with Pete Seeger, who came up with the tune. Pete sent this letter to Mike, asking Mike to fill in the words that he couldn’t make out from the recording Mike had sent him.

Figure 6. Letter to Mike from Pete Seeger (c. 2001) on their song collaboration, "Raking Leaves"





“Raking Leaves” is one of four songs we selected and decided to share with the readers of the *Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education*. The other three are “Exxon’s Up Still,” “Goes to Africa,” and “Last Fall.” Here are a few notes about each of the four songs, discussed in order of recommended listening: **“Exxon’s Up Still”**: Mike wrote this after the Exxon Valdez oil spill in late March of 1989. This disaster happened when an oil tanker owned by Exxon, and piloted by a captain who was found to have been intoxicated, hit a reef and spilled 11 million gallons of crude oil into Prince William Sound. We were living in Juneau, Alaska as Mike finished out his challenging year at Juneau-Douglas High School (described earlier). He would often reach for his guitar or banjo when he received news, personal or public, that needed expression. This song is musically complex; its modal tonality, combined with lyrics that critique the oil industry, make it a powerful piece. Clearly, the Exxon song expresses anger and frustration; a good complement to it, therefore, is **“Goes to Africa,”** which is a more experimental banjo tune. Mike wrote this song in 2014 or so. It is an example of his unique banjo playing, mixing rhythm and keys. **“Raking Leaves”**: Mike wrote this song post-911. At this time, the oil wars of 2001 were happening, and our third child, Miska, was born. The tune is based on a melody by Pete Seeger (see Figure 6). **“Last Fall”**: I think this guitar tune is a beautiful way to close the suite of songs we have selected to share.

Figure 7 shows a spot Michael loved at the south end of Cornwell Park in Bellingham. He walked daily in this park close to our house. The family took the photo on the left on the day we gathered to remember him, spread his ashes, and select a bench to honor his memory. At that time, we were strongly considering having the bench plaque read: “Reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated.” We thought this quote would really please him, because Mike loved Mark Twain, and the quip embodies Mike’s humorous trickster spirit. The photo on the right shows the bench with the plaque with the quote we ultimately used, which is from his *Papa’s Clubhouse College for Kids* art appreciation curriculum: “What is art? What is beauty? What is ice cream?” (see Figure 4). The memory bench looks out over Squalicum Creek and is near a place Michael would visit often to gather nettles.

Figure 7. Michael’s memory bench, Cornwell Park, Bellingham, 2022 and 2023



Figure 8 shows our family gathered at Michael’s memory bench (left-side photo). The adjacent picture is of our family in the beautiful box that Michael’s dear friend, Vincent, made for Mike’s



journey to the spirit world. We had a gathering of our closest friends and all wrote messages to Mike inside this lovely box made out of repurposed wood. After the messages were written, we spontaneously got into his box, to warm it up for him.

Figure 8. Michael's family, gathered at his memory bench (left) and warming up a box (right)



We conclude this with a picture of Michael (Figure 9), which was part of a photo shoot with Bellingham Bay in the background. In the early 1990s, Mike needed new promotional pictures for getting folk singing gigs. I was the photographer. I like his big smile and because it shows Michael without his beard at the start of his years in grad school at UBC, thinking he looked more respectable without the beard. Also, the photo makes the statement that his work was not only done with a pen but also with a musical instrument, his banjo.

Figure 9. Michael with his banjo, Bellingham Bay, early 1990s, photo by Cecilia Morales

