



**THE ERNEST BROOKS FOUNDATION**

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## Renowned underwater photographer Ernest Brooks II dies

**Santa Barbara, California, November 20, 2020** — Ernest Brooks II, a pioneer in diving and underwater photography, and renowned educator, ocean conservationist and philanthropist, has died. Brooks passed away of heart failure on November 17 at his home in Lacey, Washington. He was 85.

Brooks was born to be a photographer. His mother, grandmother and uncle all made pictures professionally, and his father, Ernest Brooks Sr., a world-famous nature photographer, founded Brooks Institute of Photography, a California-based arts college that graduated generations of leading photographers.

His childhood in Santa Barbara, where he swam competitively as a boy, contributed to his close connection with the ocean. He received his first camera in kindergarten. “It was during a three-mile race off the coast of Santa Barbara that my fate was sealed—through my swim goggles, I observed kelp strands, schooling fish, and sun rays disappearing into the depths,” he told DivePhotoGuide.com in 2013. “With both my parents working as photographers, I didn’t just see nature—I saw a frame and focus lines.”

Brooks began scuba diving in 1949, and quickly took up underwater photography, crafting his own housing for his first camera, a Leica, which he would load with black-and-white film. Brooks would become one of the world’s preeminent artists in black-and-white imagery of the marine world, never fully transitioning to color. He’s been dubbed the “Ansel Adams of the Sea.”

That title, he told Diver Magazine in 2007, “has been like a tattoo on me for so many years. It hasn’t washed off, and it seems it’s because of my love of black and white within the oceans of our colorful planet.”

After a short career as an Air Force pilot in the 1950s, Brooks worked with Jacques-Yves Cousteau for 17 years training the famed oceanographic researcher’s crew aboard his research vessel, Calypso, as it traversed the world’s oceans. In 1971, Brooks, who graduated from Brooks Institute in 1962, became its president, elevating the institution to a four-year university-level school. He introduced audio-visual, undersea technology, physics and optics componentry programs, and added corresponding graduate degrees. Students fondly remember him as a kind and generous educator and mentor who forever shaped their lives and careers.

“Ernest Brooks II and Brooks Institute are intertwined for me and they will always live in my heart and mind,” wrote photographer and former student, Stella Kalaw, on her website. “No doubt, my time there was one of the best and most memorable experiences in my life.”

Jay Silverman was just 17 when he first met Brooks and began his journey to becoming a leading director, producer and photographer specializing in film, television, digital and print campaigns.

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[ernestbrooksfoundation.org](http://ernestbrooksfoundation.org)

## RENOWNED UNDERWATER PHOTOGRAPHER ERNEST BROOKS II DIES

“Thank God for his unending passion and optimism, inspiring all of us to chase our dreams,” Silverman wrote. “Ernie Brooks was a huge part of paving the paths to not only success, but living a certain fulfillment that we later learned was most envied.”

Brooks also participated in numerous international photographic projects, which ranged from an investigation into the Shroud of Turin, and photo-documentation of a research station in the arctic, to a research and travel expedition in the Sea of Cortez.

In 1999, the Brooks Institute was sold to Career Education Corporation. It sold again, and eventually closed in 2016.

However, Ernie remained active in ocean conservation and in work with the Historical Diving Society USA and the Santa Barbara Maritime Museum. He was the recipient of many awards, including the DEMA Reaching Out Award, Beneath the Sea Legend of the Sea Award, and the Inaugural HDS USA Hans Hass Award. In 2015, he was inducted into the International Scuba Diving Hall of Fame.

Published in 2002, his retrospective volume of photographic work, *Silver Seas*, remains a classic. Jean-Michel Cousteau, an oceanographic explorer and son of Jacques-Yves Cousteau, contributed the foreword.

Brooks also gave back to his own community. He donated the former Brooks Institute campus to Santa Barbara Middle School, continued his support for the Maritime Museum, and remained involved in countless other philanthropic endeavors, including The Ernest Brooks Foundation, a non-profit organization whose mission remains “to support and enrich the knowledge and education of those who shape our understanding of the world through photography and the creation of visual media.”

“Ernie was a living example of the famous quote, ‘We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give,’” wrote Leslie Leaney, co-founder of the Historical Diving Society, a founding trustee of the Maritime Museum, and a longtime friend of Brooks. “And Ernie’s full life—from serving at extreme altitudes in a USAF U2 on secret missions during the Cold War, to the depths of the Channel Islands and tropical coral reefs, reflected his generous contributions.”

Ernie is survived by his children, Dan, Debbie, and Denise, and his devoted companion, Sally Vogel.