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### Honorary Memorial at Lake Merritt

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#### A Man Who Loved To Walk By Lake Merritt

Oakland ~ After months of getting to know Leon Olson as he walked around Lake Merritt three times a day, Oakland Police Officer Laura Thurman began to look forward to seeing him on her rounds as a mounted patrol officer.

He never had anything bad to say, she said. When his hip was bothering him, he smiled and shrugged it off. When it was pouring rain, he still walked, and told Thurman how good the rain was for the ducks.

And when he died June 6, she missed him terribly.

Now the Oakland officer is leading a campaign that will see a plaque installed by the lake that reads simply, "Leon Olson loved to walk here," in memory of her friend.

"I hope people will look at it and think about somebody who loved to walk around the lake," she said.

Olson, who was 89 when he died, lived in the Lake Park Retirement Residence for 12 years. His routine of walking around the lake three times a day started shortly after his move from San Francisco. He became a sort of "Lake Merritt ambassador" to those who bumped into him during his 11:00 a.m. and 2:30 and 5:30 p.m. walks.

His friends estimate he logged more than 25,000 miles around the lake in his lifetime. One of those people was Kathleen McCoy, 55, who worked downtown for several years and walked up to five times a week during her lunch break.

She always saw Olson walking the opposite way on the path, and started chatting with him when she noticed his eyes were ringed with two black bruises after a fall. The two became quick friends.

"I always tried to go for my walk at the same time, and if I didn't I would miss him," she said. "It made his day, it really did."

Two years after their first meeting, she took him to a baseball game. A standing lunch date twice a week followed.

"He would walk over to my office in his Sunday best, pick me up, take me to Lake Park and walk me back at my lunch hour," she said.

When officer Thurman noticed Olson's shoes were ready to be replaced, she called Lake Park and got his foot measurements. She bought him a pair of new shoes and told him the police ordered him to wear them, to ensure he wouldn't refuse the gift.

When he grew ill, Thurman rode her horse to Kaiser Permanente Medical Center for visits.

When she heard he had died of a heart attack in his sleep, she was sad. "The thing that hit me is that I miss him. I really miss him, and I don't know why," she said.

Olson, who was retired from San Francisco Credit Union, took to walking along Ocean Beach when he lived across the Bay. Lake Merritt was a natural choice for his new Oakland routine, his family said.

Olson's nephew, Montclair resident Richard Olson, said he kept his walking routine to keep himself focused and escape from bouts of depression. He had a love for greeting people, and when he wasn't doing so on his walks, he greeted parishioners at First Presbyterian Church every Sunday.

"When he would see somebody that he liked or had encounters with, he would just beam," Olson said.

#### Memorial Request Approved

Thurman, McCoy and Richard Olson appealed to the city Parks and Recreation Advisory Commission to place a boulder near the walking trail, with the inscribed plaque displayed on it. The commission approved their request.

The monument will be purchased by Olson's estate and a pastor from the First Christian Church in Concord will bless it.

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