



Joel Andrew Setterholm

August 3, 1959 - November 28, 2025

Joel Andrew Setterholm was born on August 3, 1959 at the Baptist Hospital in Kyoto, Japan. His parents, Lois and Paul Setterholm, were missionaries in Yanai, Japan with the Augustana Lutheran Church. Their Christmas letter that year noted:

"He's a sweet baby with a dimpled smile, wide blue eyes, and little curls over his ears. Needless to say, he is much adored by every other member of the family."

It was true. Joel was doted on by big brothers Mark and Keith and big sister Nan. While in time he lost the little curls over his ears, he never lost his dimpled smile, his wide blue eyes, and the love of his family and friends. He is greatly missed . . . and wonderful memories remain.

From the very beginning, Joel was a free spirit - stubborn, principled, and insatiably curious. His friends always knew that he marched to a different drummer. They would add that he was also unfailingly kind. His steadfast faith was bolstered - not hindered - by his passions for math and the workings of the world, especially geography. Cycling sustained him, and music fulfilled him.

He started adventuring at a young age. His first big trek was at about age 5 on a red tricycle. Joel and his best friend Miura-kun decided to ride across town to the new railroad bridge a mile away by the Yanai train station - without

telling their parents. Even before he was old enough to go to school, Joel would explore the tall hills above our home with Nan. In later years, he kept up his explorations - summiting Mt Elbert, CO, wandering the mountains around Holden Village in Washington state, visiting Glacier National Park with Carolyn, and taking shorter hikes wherever he went and whenever he had the chance.

Joel's first visit to the USA was when his parents came over for a year of furlough in 1963. His Mom wrote in her letter after that year: "His happiest hours were spent playing with his cousin Peter, who had just returned from Africa. The international conversation of these two little boys was something to overhear." Peter's parents had been missionaries in then Tanganyika.

Back in Japan, Joel attended first grade with his Japanese friends at Yanai Primary school. His mother home-schooled him in English through Calvert correspondence school. In early 1967, the family moved to Yokohama, where Joel attended Yokohama International School from grades 2 - 10, except for 5th grade, when he attended Bancroft Elementary school in Minneapolis during another furlough.

Joel eventually moved from the tricycle to the bicycle, and in a way, never dismounted. He often commuted by bicycle and made himself very familiar with the biking trails throughout the Twin Cities. "What did you do on Saturday afternoon, Joel?" "Oh, just went to Stillwater . . ." That 48-mile roundtrip was a favorite. So it was not at all surprising that Joel became a regular adult leader with Spoke Folk - a summer music ministry program where, over about a week, youth would cycle together an average of 50 miles a day and present at various churches.

In the summer of 1988, he and friend Mike Edlund toured Europe by bike. Except for perhaps music, Joel was happiest on a bike - he continued to enjoy

riding until the late summer of 2025, when the gradual weakening of his body caught up with him and pushed that joy beyond his reach.

Joel's lifelong fascination with numbers became ever more pronounced in his high school years. Sitting in the backseat of a big blue Chevy with sister Nan as their family drove across the US in 1975, the year that they retired from the mission field, Joel kept asking her for random numbers as he played with a new calculator.

Enrolling as a junior at St. Anthony High School and attending Nativity Lutheran Church, he made friends quickly, many of whom he stayed close to throughout the rest of his life. In school, his love for mathematics and computers blossomed, and he went on to get a degree in Electrical Engineering from the University of Minnesota, followed by a first job at computer company Sperry Univac.

Joel's passion for music came early. As soon as he could stand, he would reach up on tiptoe and incessantly pound the piano keys. Recognizing this attraction, his parents provided for occasional piano lessons, but Joel was largely self-taught. As many who knew him in later years can attest, he preferred to improvise and figure out things for himself.

High school was when Joel's love for music took off. Starting with the Youth Choir at Nativity Lutheran Church, he went on to join the adult choir. His love of numbers never abated, but music . . . music called to him, and he left Sperry in 1986 to join Lutheran Youth Encounter (LYE). He traveled the East Coast for nine months as part of music team Common Bread, playing keyboards and doing vocals at churches. In 1987, he enrolled in a master's program in Mathematics at the University of Minnesota, but the siren call of making music with friends again pulled at him. He suspended his academic

career in the middle of 1990 to join LYE's West Coast Boys, traveling both nationally and in Europe. Playing music in Germany soon after the fall of the Berlin Wall was a highlight.

Anyone who saw Joel play or sing music could see how it transported him. He radiated passion and joy, not to mention plenty of volume! He played the piano and sang for many, many weddings and other occasions for friends, including both Keith's and Nan's weddings. In 2000, Joel teamed up with Lowell Michelson to record their delightful Christmas album Clarity. In the past 15 years, Joel discovered Shape Note singing and sang exuberantly with the Twin Cities Shape Note community.

While at LYE, Joel met a kindred spirit - Carolyn Perkins. At first, they were good friends who liked to take walks, go for a bike ride, or take in a movie. They dated on and off for a decade. Joel's family fell in love with Carolyn, and her family with Joel. Finally, after Joel's eldest nephew, Nick, got engaged in 2015, Joel decided it was about time for him to do so also. "I couldn't let my nephew get married before me!", he said with a wink . . . That Easter, he wrote a cryptic "Nothing has happened this year - yet" on Keith and Tori's festive Easter egg patterned tablecloth, where guests were encouraged to write a highlight of their year in one of the Easter eggs. He proposed a few evenings later, on a gorgeous late spring night, as he and Carolyn gazed at the moon, planets, and stars. They were wedded 4 months later at Gloria Dei Lutheran church - friends came from far and near - and there was much rejoicing by all!

A bit more than 10 years later, here we are. . . Joel was diagnosed with a neuroendocrine tumor in July of 2020. Throughout his years of treatments, from chemo to major surgery to radiation and more chemo, Joel continued to live life to the fullest. His doctor called him once to tell him about a dangerously low thyroid level, thinking Joel would be laid out on the couch. Joel didn't have the heart to tell him that he was out on a bike ride. "I did feel a

bit tired . . ."

He kept working at his job with a test grading company. He took multiple trips with Carolyn to visit both her family and his. They traveled to Missouri to see the complete solar eclipse of 2017. He kept playing piano - even after the surgery affected his hand, and singing - even after the surgery had affected his ability to breathe deeply. He continued to contribute his piano talents for services at various churches. He regularly did the annual January "polar plunge" in various Twin Cities lakes. He kept playing cribbage with Carolyn and watching Jeopardy. He kept noodling with numbers - "consider a scale model of the universe in which the earth is a grain of sand . . ." He was passionate about speaking out for the poor, for immigrants, and for those living in war-torn places. He kept riding his bike vs. taking a car. Joel lived lightly upon the earth, enjoyed all it had to offer, and deeply cared for it.

Joel leaves behind his beloved wife Carolyn, brother Mark of Eugene, OR, brother Keith (Tori) of St. Paul, MN, and sister Nan Van Sandt (Steve) of Brownsville, OR. He also leaves a big hole in the hearts of his nephews and nieces. Joel was with Nan when she went for her first ultrasound for nephew Nick (Kana) Van Sandt. His nephew Noah (Hannah) Setterholm shares the joy and skill of piano-playing with Joel. Joel introduced nephew Anders (Rae) Van Sandt to Ultimate Frisbee, which led to Anders meeting his wife. Niece Abby (Calder) Phillips-Grafflin recalls many fun bike trips with him. Marriage to Carolyn brought three more nephews and another niece to delight in - David, Max, Aiden, and Angelica. He also left 2 great-nephews, 2 great-nieces, multiple cousins, and Carolyn's brothers and extended family - which he had heartily adopted as his own. Joel's numerous friends across the nation cannot be counted. Those he shared music with, lived with, went on trips with . . . He was indeed blessed.

When Joel was in his last few days, laying in his living room gazing out at a

beautiful tree in the front yard and an ever-changing sky, Noah often played for him - "Joel style". Joel took his last breath on the evening of November 28, 2025, while family and friends gathered around him, singing "Angels We Have Heard on High".

Joel has joined those angels now, and his family and lifelong friends continue to sense his light and be thankful for his presence in their lives.

Memorials preferred to Lutheran World Relief. Donations can be made to Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in Saint Paul or Nativity Lutheran Church in Saint Anthony.

Funeral service is Friday April 24th at 1:00 PM, with visitation at 12:00 PM at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, 700 Snelling Ave S, St Paul, MN.

Previous Events

Visitation

APR **24**. 12:00 PM - 1:00 PM (CT)

Gloria Dei Lutheran Church
700 Snelling Ave S
Saint Paul, MN 55116

Church Service

APR **24**. 1:00 PM - 2:00 PM (CT)

Gloria Dei Lutheran Church
700 Snelling Ave S
Saint Paul, MN 55116

Tribute Wall

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“ 2 files added to the album *Ultimate*



Ultimate - April 24 at 10:57 PM