

Charles F. Brush, Archaeologist Who Piled Adventure Upon Adventure, Dies at 83

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Published: June 11, 2006



Craig Chesek/The Explorers Club, 2004

Charles F. Brush III

Correction Appended

Charles F. Brush III, an archaeologist who as president of the Explorers Club persuaded his brethren to take on a singular adventure — admitting women to their den of stuffed polar bears, tarantula appetizers and overstuffed armchairs — died on June 1 in Manhattan. He was 83.

The cause was congestive heart failure, his son, Charles IV, said.

Dr. Brush, who lived in Shelter Island, N.Y., took up mountain climbing at 49, ran his first marathon at 54, and climbed the sheer Devil's Tower in Wyoming at 70, two days after taking up rock climbing. One of the legendary parties he had at his Park Avenue penthouse had Allen Ginsberg sitting in the nude chanting in front of a Buddha sculpture in the living room, The New York Times reported in 1993.

Dr. Brush was an eccentric, even in the eccentric Explorers Club — and he could afford to be. His grandfather, Charles Francis Brush, perfected the arc light and was making money from illuminating city streets while Thomas Edison was still working on his first bulb. Dr. Brush III's father, with some help from his own father, started what is now Brush Engineered Materials, a leading producer of beryllium metal.

Dr. Brush III, who was never bothered by a 9-to-5 job, was a director of this family company, now publicly traded, for 45 years until 2003. He explained to The Plain Dealer newspaper of Cleveland that he served because as an anthropologist, he was fascinated with boardroom dynamics.

He earned his doctorate in anthropology from [Columbia](#) in 1969 with a dissertation about his discovery of some of Mexico's most ancient pottery. He described this work in Science magazine in 1965. Working with the [American Museum of Natural History](#), he unearthed evidence of very early alloying of bronze in Mexico.

Charles IV said his father may have become bored with archaeology, so he turned to challenges like mountain climbing and scuba diving. In 1983, Dr. Brush combined these passions by ascending a 19,455-foot volcano on the border of Chile and Bolivia, then diving into a lake in its crater.

The quarry was Incan artifacts at the bottom, but he and his colleagues could find only tiny crustaceans, which they took back to [Yale](#). The specimens turned out to be a new species. A friend nonetheless wrote him that the whole expedition was "some kind of Evel Knievel stunt."

Dr. George Van Brunt Cochran, Dr. Brush's successor as Explorers Club president, was only slightly more diplomatic. Calling Dr. Brush "a controversial figure here at the club," Dr. Cochran said in an interview with *Newsday* at the time that some members doubted the expedition's significance, believing Dr. Brush just wanted to set a high-altitude diving record. It was pointed out that one of his colleagues on the expedition had dived in the lake on an earlier climb, though without scuba equipment.

Dr. Brush responded, "Typical back-biting sour grapes."

His daughter Karen Alexandra Brush, an archaeologist who joined the Explorers Club after her father gained admission rights for women, explained the use of such language within the club's august Tudor-style home in an interview last week.

"Everybody's an alpha male, and they're all used to being the most interesting person you've ever met," she said.

Charles Francis Brush III was born in Cleveland on April 3, 1923, and in later years collected wines from that year, though hardly exclusively. His father died when he was 3. Then his only sibling, a sister, died, and he and his mother moved to Riverdale in the Bronx. The two traveled around the world when he was 17.

He graduated from the Fountain Valley School of Colorado and from Yale. His college education was interrupted by service in the Army Signal Corps during World War II. After living on a plantation in Jamaica, where he owned a restaurant, he began doctoral studies at Columbia.

He met another graduate student, Ellen K. Sperry, in the anthropology department's "bone room." She became his third wife in 1958.

She survives him, along with his son, Charles IV, of Manhattan; his daughters Karen, of Manhattan, Barbara Brush Wright of Shelter Island, and Danielle Brush Schmid of Huntington Beach, Calif.; seven grandchildren; and a great-granddaughter.

After climbing three Mexican volcanoes at 49, his first year of climbing, he soon made up for lost time by scaling the highest summits in North America, South America, Europe and Africa. He switched to running marathons at 54 because he was disenchanted with the downscale crowd of climbers who greeted him at the top of Mount McKinley in Alaska on July 6, 1976; he was two days late for a Bicentennial celebration because of the death of a fellow climber.

At the Explorers Club, of which Dr. Brush was president from 1978 to 1981, he did little to belie his swashbuckling reputation. His dinner jacket was lined with fabric showing the club's flag, which has accompanied polar pioneers and astronauts. Members long remarked on the mountain climbers he sent rappelling from a balcony at a banquet at the Waldorf.

Dr. Brush's success in bringing in women began with persuading the conservative board of directors to vote on allowing members to decide. The vote was a tie, so Dr. Brush cast the deciding vote. Members then voted, 753 to 613, in favor.

"It was highly bizarre to call ourselves an explorers' club and exclude half the world," Dr. Brush said.

Correction: June 14, 2006

An obituary on Sunday about Charles F. Brush III, an archaeologist and former president of the Explorers Club, incorrectly listed his third wife, Ellen Sperry Brush, as a survivor. She died in 1999. The obituary also misstated his grandfather's given name in some copies. He was Charles Francis Brush, not George Francis.