



# Sidney Zuckoff

NOV 26, 1928 - MAR 5, 2026



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## Sidney “Sid” Zuckoff

NEWTON, Mass. – **Sidney Zuckoff**, who spent three decades as a New York City social studies teacher and on the side taught scores of students how to play tennis and earn a driver’s license, died March 5, 2026, of natural causes at an assisted living community. He was 97.

Sid, as he was known to friends and family, was a devoted practitioner and proselytizer of meditation, which he credited for a late-in-life sense of peace, presence, and understanding that sustained him as his knees failed and losses of loved ones and old friends mounted.

He immersed himself in current events to his dying day, a proud liberal who devoured The New York Times and The Washington Post on his iPad; who watched countless hours of CNN and MSNBC/MS Now; and who participated with gusto in an October 2025 “No Kings” rally.

Sid often raged with moral clarity and deep historical context against politicians and policies he perceived to be authoritarian, anti-American and anti-democratic. As his robust health failed in recent months, doctors routinely tried to gauge his mental acuity by asking him to name the current president. Sid always refused.

At the center of his existence was his wife of nearly 60 years, Geraldine “Gerry” Rabinowitz Zuckoff, whom he credited with saving his life with her support and compassion. He described her as “an avatar of love.” Sid’s devotion to and admiration for Gerry remained undimmed after her death in 2014.

He frequently told the story of their first meeting, in 1954, at what became the climax of his two-year search for a wife. Disappointed by the weekly dances he attended in his home borough of Brooklyn, he crossed the bridge to Manhattan. On his tour around a hotel dance floor, he spotted



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a dark-haired young woman with kind eyes. When he asked her to dance, she declined and he moved on. Sid's firm policy throughout his search was never to return to a woman who declined his invitation, but something about her made him break his rule. He asked her a second time and she agreed.

At a coffee shop later that night – also a first, as Sid's normal practice was to end the night with a phone number for a subsequent date – Sid asked Gerry why she refused his first invitation. She explained that the band was playing a cha-cha, a dance that involved jumping forward and back, making it impossible to talk with a partner.

“It was a stupid dance,” Sid would say later. But what impressed him most was Gerry's self-confidence, her willingness to pass on a potential suitor if circumstances weren't right. He credited her inner calm to the unconditional love she received as a child.

After seven dates over seven weeks, Sid surprised Gerry (and to some extent himself) by proposing. He didn't have a ring, and in her modesty and practicality, Gerry couldn't see herself wearing a diamond. She asked him to buy her a watch, so he did. They married seven months later. She wore the watch for the rest of her life.

The success of their marriage stood in stark contrast to his earlier family life, with parents ill-suited for each other or for raising a child. To escape the emotional frigidity of their cramped apartment, Sid raced down three flights to the raucous streets of Brownsville, Brooklyn, where his natural athleticism earned him a place with neighborhood boys who became lifelong friends.

Eventually, Sid and 16 members of their crew – guys with names like Peck and Abe, Lou and Ruby, Norman and Carl – dubbed themselves “Club Seventeen” and had that label emblazoned on shiny sateen jackets they wore with teen-age swagger. With the help of a panel truck Sid used in his pre-dawn job working for his grandfather, who had a small scrap leather business, club members “liberated” furniture from an apartment building lobby. They used it to furnish a basement they rented as their “clubhouse” to host parties with neighborhood girls.

With no guidance from family, Sid attended a trade school where his near-total lack of aptitude with mechanical devices rendered him a poor fit. He often joked that every time he attempted to build something in shop class – whether he intended to make a lamp or a cabinet or a briefcase – he'd eventually carve two grooves and declare it an ashtray.



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While he lacked technical ability, Sid was a natural when it came to history class. He sat near another mechanically challenged schoolmate, Isadore Kronish, a student universally acknowledged to be the smartest boy at Brooklyn Automotive, destined to receive every available academic honor. Other than Isadore, no one was more shocked than Sid when Sid won the History Medal at graduation.

Acting on an unquenchable drive that was his defining characteristic, Sid enrolled at Brooklyn College in pursuit of a history degree, with a particular interest in the American Revolution. He paid his way by working overnight shifts at a post office.

While at Brooklyn College, to avoid the post-World War II draft, Sid and several of his boyhood friends enlisted in the Army National Guard. During weekend and occasional week-long outings, Sid was “the lowest of the low,” as he’d say, a private with a single stripe on his sleeve. He marched at dawn, slept outside, and drove a two-and-a-half-ton truck to transport himself and fellow troops from the city to upstate training grounds.

A staff sergeant – with three stripes on his sleeve – took special pleasure in tormenting Sid, for reasons Sid never discerned. The sergeant ran the mess tent, where he invented infractions that required Sid to scrub filthy pots and perform menial tasks on “KP,” kitchen patrol duty.

One morning as he tried to avoid the sergeant’s wrath, Sid was approached by a Captain Peterson.

“Zuckoff, you’re a college boy, right?”

“Yes, sir!”

“Good. Our company clerk” -- in their infantry unit, 42nd Division, Company L -- “just got transferred. We need someone to type the morning report. Do you know how to type?”

Sid faced a split-second decision. Clerks don’t march at dawn or sleep in the woods, he calculated.

“Yes, sir!” he lied.

Sid had never laid his hands on a typewriter. But his close friend Lou Berger had a sister named Doris in secretarial school. Sid borrowed her typewriter and stayed up all night teaching himself



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to type.

When Sid next reported for duty, the captain explained that a mere private couldn't be trusted to type the all-important daily company report. He had Sid promoted to master sergeant – a rank that decorated his uniform with six stripes AND a diamond.

Soon after, Sid walked into the mess hall.

“Zuckoff!” the staff sergeant hissed as he bore down on Sid.

As his tormenter drew near, Sid tapped the impressive insignia on his sleeve.

“Where'd you get that jacket?” the staff sergeant demanded.

Sid smiled and sauntered off, taking with him a lesson he applied for nearly eight decades: when faced with adversity, outwork and outsmart your enemy, human or otherwise.

After earning his master's degree and teaching certificate, Sid returned to Brooklyn Automotive as a history teacher, a career path he believed was unprecedented at a school that produced countless auto mechanics (and one doctor, Kronish). Decades later, the hit television series “Welcome Back, Kotter” traced an identical story arc, of a delinquent “sweathog” returning to his old school to teach, but Sid did it first.

Sid eventually moved to the more academically focused Thomas Jefferson High School (and later, to South Shore High School). Not long after his arrival at “Jeff,” Sid was hailed as a hero after a disturbed boy upset over a broken romance entered his classroom and tossed caustic lye into his ex's face, seeking to blind him. Sid calmed the class and raced the wounded student to a washroom, where his quick action was credited with saving the student's sight. The New York Times published a Page One story about the incident on September 20, 1957, and Sid received a commendation from the mayor of New York.

Two years later, the student body dedicated the yearbook to Sid and invited him to speak at graduation. His comments, printed in full, included the following thoughts that reflected Sid's core philosophy:



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“New and greater responsibilities face you, decisions affecting a lifetime will have to be made, and greatest of all, the opportunity for fulfillment as an individual awaits you. The challenges are there.

“In confronting these challenges, let tolerance be your constant companion; recognize that honesty and integrity cannot be compromised; realize that education is a never-ending process; be aware that acquisition of material goods is not the key to happiness, but that service to your fellow man, to your community, and to your nation offers much greater personal rewards.”

Although teaching was his main profession and his side hustle, Sid got particular enjoyment from his post-teaching, decade-long work as an “outside salesman,” much of that time for a lumber yard in Queens, N.Y. He laughingly acknowledged that he knew nothing about lumber, but he realized that his and his competitors’ products were virtually identical, so he won sales by beating other yards on price and service. For the remainder of his life, whenever he wanted to persuade someone or obtain information, he’d say, “I know what I’m doing. I’m a salesman.”

For much of his adult life, tennis provided an outlet for his athletic gifts and camaraderie among a diverse group of like-minded fanatics. Always looking to earn additional money for his family, in addition to a sideline as a driver’s ed teacher, Sid began giving tennis lessons on weekends. Eventually he became certified as a teaching pro by the U.S. Professional Tennis Association. He stopped only because it cut into his playing time.

A lefty, Sid had a rocket first serve. When his serve was “on,” it was nearly unreturnable for club-level players. In the finals of a local tournament when he lived in Bellmore, New York, Sid lost the first set 6-0 to a brash former college player who modeled his game on John McEnroe, complete with cursing and histrionics. Sid kept silent, focused on his serve, and watched his younger opponent unravel. Sid won the next two sets and the tournament. He laid down his racquet in his 80s, after countless hours on hard courts eroded the cartilage in his knees.

His most frequent expression in his last years: “I love life.” Weeks before his death, Sid quietly added: “Life is about growth.”

Sid spent his last four years in Massachusetts, living independently, driving his beloved Mazda CX-5 until shortly before his 97th birthday, and asking, “Need anything at Costco?” Even after he



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entered assisted living in December 2025, he plotted to return to apartment life and buy a new car.

Sid's greatest pleasures included his family, a good joke, hot soup, a very occasional beer, a Celtics win, shrimp lo mein, a fresh haircut, Jewish deli, organic blueberries, a well-struck backhand, a bargain, Carvel sundaes with wet walnuts, and the United Federation of Teachers. He loved watching Rachel Maddow, dancing, counting his fingers after feeding treats to a dog, reading columns by Maureen Dowd and Thomas L. Friedman, dressing well, studying health and longevity, re-reading "The Inner Game of Tennis," voting for every Democratic presidential candidate starting with Adlai Stevenson, and chatting with Sunrise of Newton care manager Peterson Jean.

Sid will be buried beside Gerry at Eternal Light Memorial Gardens in Boynton Beach, Florida. After raising their family in Bellmore, Sid and Gerry spent many years in Boynton Beach in happy, inseparable retirement, enjoying their view of a little lake, Phase 10, and family visits, with several of Sid's Club Seventeen friends and their wives close by. Also with them in Florida for many of those years were Gerry's older brother Lou and sister-in-law Rita, and her younger sister Doreen and her husband Chuck. All but Doreen predeceased them.

Sid is survived by his sons Allan, a psychologist and author, and Mitchell, a journalism professor at Boston University and an author; their respective wives, Bonnie, a psychologist and author, and Suzanne, a photojournalist and author; and three grandchildren: Isabel, a director at a public health nonprofit; Alex, a musician and actor; and Eve, a journalist with WBUR.

Donations in Sid's memory can be made to the American Cancer Society, which he supported to honor Gerry.




# Events


**Sidney Zuckoff**

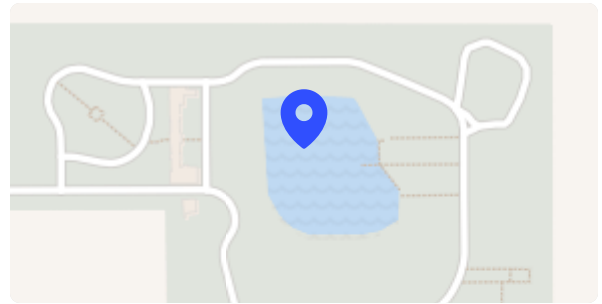
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## Graveside Service


 **Wednesday**, March 11, 2026


 10:00 AM ET

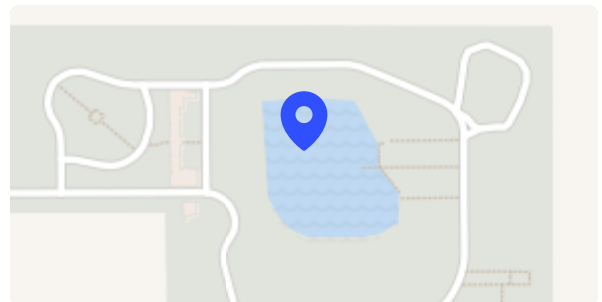
 **Eternal Light Memorial Gardens**  
11520 FL-7, Boynton Beach FL 33473



## Cemetery Details

 **Eternal Light Memorial Gardens**  
11520 FL-7, Boynton Beach FL 33473

 **(561) 782-8538**





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