



AAC Publications

Maria Cranor, 1946–2023

Maria Boone Cranor—luminary rock climber, co-founder of Black Diamond Equipment, and lecturer in physics at the University of Utah—died of cancer on January 15, 2023, at the Salt Lake City home of her great friends April and Dale Goddard. She was 76.

Maria grew up in San Francisco, the oldest of five. From the start she was the leader of the pack—bold, adventurous, and creative. Her siblings followed her everywhere, including onto vertical cliffs above San Francisco’s China Beach, much to the dismay of her parents. A precocious reader, she began school at the age of 4 and graduated from high school at 16, having read Tolstoy and Dostoyevski and become fluent in French. She studied anthropology as an undergraduate at UC Berkeley through the mid-1960s and left the university intellectually challenged, energized, and committed to progressive politics.

Despite the cliff scrambling of her youth, Maria was not much of an outdoorsy person. That changed in her early 20s, when she met her first husband, Carl Cranor, during her annual family vacation to Yosemite. They hit it off. For their first date, he took her hiking along the south fork of the Merced River. She wore cowboy boots and came home with horrible blisters. One of Cranor’s friends soon introduced her to rock climbing, and she was hooked.

“Nancy and I stuffed our packs into my tiny hatchback,” she wrote in a 2010 essay for the Patagonia catalog, referring to her lifelong friend Nancy Henderson. “We picked out some routes we thought we could do and we were primed for our first trip to the Valley—girls on the loose with rope, rack, and, we hoped, the chops to hold our own at the epicenter of the climbing universe.”

It wasn’t long before she proved to herself—and everyone around her—that she had the chops. She spent the requisite time living in the parking lot of Yosemite’s legendary Camp 4 and climbing the crags of Joshua Tree with climbers such as John Bachar and John Long—devoting the daylight hours to the wall and making lifelong friends at night. She described climbing as “meeting the mission”; it spoke to her desire to take the hard way and to find the solutions to difficult problems.

Priding herself on technique rather than brute strength, she was a natural mentor for the other women in the male-dominated climbing scene. She was the first woman to ascend Valhalla (5.11a) at Suicide Rock, and she flashed it. “Maria was the first [woman] I ever saw climbing really hard,” climber Mari Gingery said.

In 1984, Maria was working at Great Pacific Iron Works, the retail store for Chouinard Equipment, and soon was hired into a customer service role. By 1985 she had created a position for herself as director of marketing. After Chouinard Equipment declared bankruptcy in 1989, she bought the assets for the company along with Peter Metcalf, who became the longtime CEO, and a handful of other former employees. Their team moved the headquarters to Salt Lake City in 1991 and called it Black Diamond.

Maria worked as vice president of marketing and creative director for nine years, fighting to make sure the company was advancing along with the sport.

“She saw the future of climbing out the windshield not the rearview mirror,” said Metcalf. “She was always genius at being able to intuitively understand where the sport was and where it was going.”

Time after time, she shepherded progressive Black Diamond products, including the Spot bouldering pad and backpack, the ATC belay device, and the wiregate carabiner.

At the age of 50, Maria left Black Diamond and enrolled as an undergraduate at the University of Utah, where she took on a double major in physics and childhood development. Her physics classes were particularly challenging because she had not taken math since high school. But she was determined to succeed, received math tutoring from Black Diamond engineers and old friends, and thrived in the program.

After earning her bachelor of science from the university, she was admitted to the graduate program in physics and studied under Richard Price, a leading specialist in general relativity. She also became a lecturer, and her course on science writing would be the most popular in the department.

Throughout her adult life in Salt Lake City, she and climber Jonny Woodward, to whom she was married from 1986 to 2000, hosted famously fun dinner parties. Renowned climbers like Lynn Hill and Mark Twight would mingle with brilliant physicists and other friends of diverse backgrounds. The parties fostered fascinating conversations, career development, and sometimes romance.

"She really did improve people," says Dale Goddard. "She created this context in which only their best selves could play."

Maria did not ultimately finish her Ph.D., but that didn't matter to her. She was more invested in learning than earning an advanced degree. As her life continued, she became very concerned about the future of the country and directed her formidable energy at causes she believed in. At the age of 67, she moved to Pueblo, Colorado, for seven months to work for the first Obama campaign, coordinating local activities and registering voters door to door.

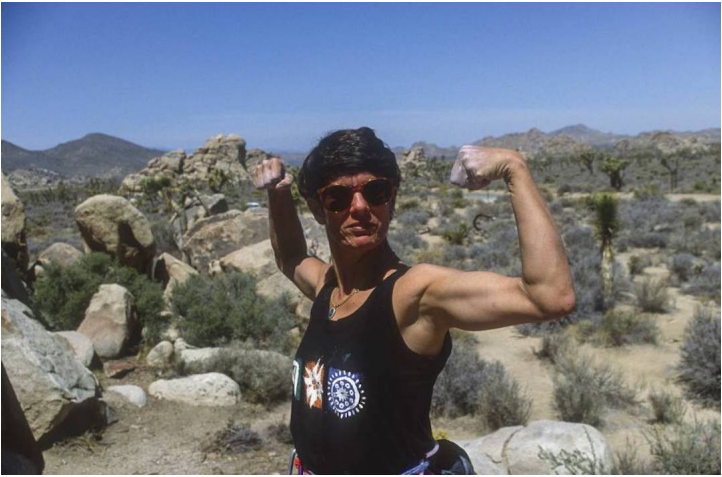
Using money she earned in her Black Diamond days, she also became a philanthropic donor—often reminding family and friends that she believed the ability to accumulate substantial wealth is a policy flaw. Much of her philanthropy, in terms of both time and resources, was devoted to UC Berkeley, where she served four terms on the board of trustees from 2013 to 2023 and endowed a chair of the Museum of Paleontology, which she named after her father, Philip Sanford Boone. Additionally, she helped to establish the Glynn Isaac Postdoctoral Fellowships in Paleolithic Archaeology and the Desmond Clark Graduate Fellowship for graduate students in the Human Evolution Research Center.

"Maria stands up for what's right, and I think people wanted to work with her because of that," says Charles Marshall, the Philip Sandford Boone Chair in Paleontology at UC Berkeley. "They wanted her input, wanted to talk to her, wanted to be energized by her. Her impact was so much greater than her donations."

Maria Boone Cranor is remembered and adored by the great many people for whom she was a source of encouragement, joy, inspiration, and friendship.

— **Alastair Boone**

Images



Maria Cranor in Joshua Tree.



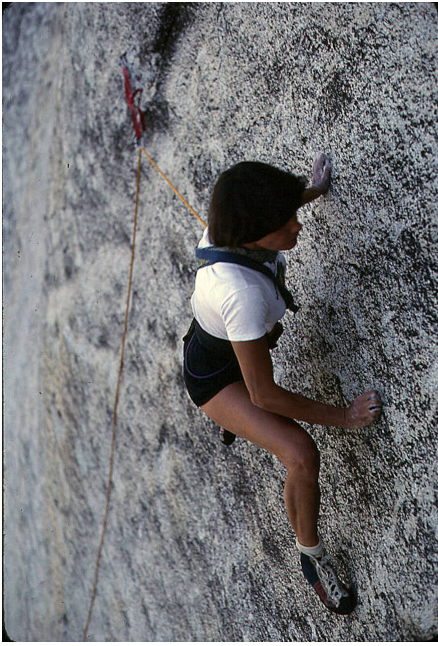
Maria Cranor at the home of April and Dale Goddard.



Maria Cranor at Berkeley.



Maria Cranor working at the crag at Joshua Tree.



Maria Cranor leading Ten Carat Gold at Suicide Rock.

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