



William Lewis Visser

DEC 21, 1940 - AUG 10, 2023



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How effortlessly suave he looked – his curly silver hair brushed back and almost rakishly hanging near his collar, his dress shirt chicly unbuttoned to display his sinewy, tennis-tanned physique.

William Visser was a social magnet and, when he showed his flowing moves on the party boat dancefloor, he would seem to glide over, gin-and-tonic in hand, and want to know what you had to think about the world. It did not matter that this was the summer of 1999 at his wife's 50th birthday party – it was always the right time to talk about international affairs.

William, who died August 10 at 82, saw himself as an inquisitive independent thinker and a man of the world.

He grew up on the small island of Curaçao, a Dutch protectorate in the Caribbean, in a time where race and class and nationality could more often than not define a life's trajectory. He burst through those artificial but definite confines to carve a new identity for himself. Even in his older age, his voice would catch as he recalled grade school classmates' birthday parties where he was not welcome because his skin was a shade too dark.

William's first departure from the Caribbean came through a scholarship to attend The Hague Hotel School in the Netherlands. Decades later, he would say he applied for the program while sitting in a crowded car, surrounded by friends who scoffed at his ambition. From Holland, he would go on to advance his education in multiple countries, and he retained all his life a restless, wandering drive and a boundless curiosity about the people and forces that shape the planet. He was ever hopeful, even by acts as simple as reading the paper and engaging in social debate, that he could be part of what makes the world go 'round.

His career was spent at the nexus of politics and economics, with a particular focus on the well-being of Latin America. He held officer-level jobs with the United Nations Fund for Population Activities and the U.N. Development Programme, and he later also worked for the World



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Resources Institute, a research organization. He spent his life among academics, diplomats, philanthropists, journalists, and leaders of non-governmental organizations – punctuated by occasional brushes with royalty and heads of state.

He was fond of relating the time one of his U.N. roles took him to Cuba and, upon arriving at a banquet at which Fidel Castro was present, William walked in a little too briskly with an umbrella in hand. Castro’s bodyguards slammed him against the wall, until it was clear he was not an assassin. By his account, William even got an apology from Castro, with whom he briefly bonded in Spanish over their shared Caribbean heritage. It’s unclear if William out-talked Fidel, though odds are good.

William Lewis Visser was born in Willemstad, Curaçao, on Dec. 21, 1940. His father, Willem, worked as a civilian administrator for the Royal Dutch Navy and used his spare time to referee soccer matches.

His mother, the former Celia Maduro, studied for a career in education, then became a homemaker who raised four children, of which William was the second oldest.

On the island, William (or “Boei,” as he was often called growing up) excelled in school and in athletics. In particular, he developed a lifelong passion for baseball. He played first base on a club team called Lucky Strike, which included a fantastically tall and strong pitcher known as “Chiquitin.”

One day, Chiquitin threw so hard to first that the ball broke William’s thumb. Decades later, William’s son attended a major league game in New York at which Chiquitin’s grandson “Didi” Gregorius was playing for the Yankees. From the stands, the younger Visser screamed the older Gregorius’s unmistakable nickname as the Yankees exited the field. Didi, with unknowing irony, gave a thumbs up.

After early schooling on Curaçao and in Holland, William earned an undergraduate degree in the mid-1960s from El Colegio de Mexico in Mexico City. He completed a master’s degree in history from the University of Wisconsin in 1968, followed by a second master’s degree, from the department of sociomedical sciences, from Columbia University in 1973.



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His long-held dream was to complete a doctorate in history and he had it conferred by The George Washington University in 2008, with a thesis titled “Hope Derailed: Import Substituting Development Policies in Latin America: 1949 – 1994.”

Over the years, William had teaching stints at the private Maret School in Washington, Montgomery College in Rockville, Md., and Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pa. He found the experience gratifying, although it was tempered by occasional disappointments with a student body that did not always value education as much as he did. At the junior college, he said, a student once turned in a paper so sloppily plagiarized that it included the line “As I wrote in my previous books....”

Supporting him throughout all his endeavors was his wife, Debby Moses. As Debby’s brother, Paul, recounted, she was living in Manhattan in the early 1970s and had parlayed her fluency in French into a job at the U.N. “In the past, she had rarely talked about people she was dating,” Paul remembered, “but now we were hearing about a dashing diplomat from Curaçao with whom she was spending more and more time.”

“This was not a whirlwind courtship,” Paul added. “On several occasions, William was out of the country on assignment for extended periods of time. Debby, though, had determined this was the man for her and waited patiently for William to arrive at a similar conclusion.”

They wed in 1980. Debby – who worked in community and economic development – shared with William an idealism, an openness of mind, and a desire for affection and emotional connection that put them in demand socially.

They had two children, Joanna and Timothy, amid careers that took them to Santiago, Mexico City, and New York. Mexico was the posting that William loved most, recalling vividly the splendor of his home where he was often host to an international cast of friends. “William’s command of languages was fantastic,” Paul noted. “At a party in Mexico, I once heard him slipping effortlessly between English, Spanish, Portuguese and French while seemingly regretting that no attendee spoke Papiamentu.”

Their longtime home in Chevy Chase, where they raised (surprise!) two high-achieving lawyers and an adorably overweight cat named Cinnamon (who drank water from the tap), was a perpetually welcoming oasis for extended family and friends.



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Thanksgiving dinners were legendarily warm affairs, with guests encouraged to bring innumerable other guests. Debby prepared a feast, which in turn prepared everyone for William's soliloquies on the leftist regimes in Venezuela and Cuba, and how they were misunderstood by most in the media and government.

One sometimes could get the sense that more than defending the authoritarian leftwing regimes, his concern was a soft spot for anyone standing up to what he considered empire, in particular American imperialism. He pointedly never wanted U.S. citizenship.

To anyone dubious of his political arguments, he would say he was expounding on the Caribbean view of things, not the American view, then he would offer another drink. He was a convivial anti-colonialist contrarian.

Besides his foremost love of Debby, his children and grandchildren, his adorations were many: fine restaurants with crisp white tablecloths; reading history; the Yankees and New York Giants and Dutch soccer; the hard copy edition of the New York Times; classical music; and world cinema. As much as he lived in his head, he loved being physically active, whether through tennis (which he played regularly into his 70s) or attending Unitarian Universalist churches on the Upper East Side and in Bethesda with Debby, whose death in 2015 left him devastated.

Throughout his final years, he reserved his biggest smiles and tightest embraces for his three grandchildren, whom he was with days before his passing.

In addition to Debby and his parents, William was predeceased by his sister Ilse Jonkman-Visser (Jan Jonkman). William is survived by his daughter Joanna Visser Adjoian (Aren Adjoian and Zadie), his son Timothy Visser (Catherine Rivkin Visser, Derek and Hanna), and his siblings Sheila Manders-Visser (Hans Manders) and Roy Visser (Ali Koers). He is also survived by loving nieces and nephews, and extended family and friends across the globe.

Donations in William's memory can be made to the Pan American Development Foundation and to the Youth Sentencing & Reentry Project. A private family celebration of life will be held in Washington, DC in September.

*This tribute was lovingly crafted by Adam Bernstein and Marina Walker Guevara.



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Martha Van Krimpen posted:

Condoleances to Poppy, Sheila and Roy in fond memory of their kindness. I remember William with mixed feelings about our marriage but time heals all wounds. May he rest in peace. Martha van Krimpen, Rotterdam, the Netherlands.

September 24 at 5:23 AM



Great Auntie Marjorie Lee sent a Fairest of All to the Visser family.



September 7 at 6:04 AM



Bob Debettencourt posted:

My condolences to Tim and Joanna and the large extended family of William. So many happy memories of numerous chats, discussions, outings, Wednesday dinners and Friday off-site restaurant lunches make me smile to recall. William's years here at Kentlands Manor were energetic and engaging for me and other residents. Some of us were jealous of his Tennis ability and vigor. His true stories of a diplomat, UN courier, professor and world traveller had many of us riveted at times. I'm glad we were friends and, occasionally, was able to solve his stubborn printer and email problems. Pax vobis, Bob deBettencourt

August 16 at 8:59 PM



Memories only last if you share them

Join us in honoring William by contributing to a collection of shared memories.



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