James N. Hullett (Jay) of Cambridge, Massachusetts, died on June 2, 2024, after a brief illness. He was 85 years old.

He grew up in Hartford, Connecticut, the son of the president of the Hartford Insurance Company. During his youth, he spent several summers in Maine with his friend David Rockwell, nephew of the artist Andrew Wyeth. The two boys spent time walking the countryside with the artist and observing him in his studio. It was there that Jay’s appreciation and understanding of art blossomed.

From the Sedgewick Middle School in West Hartford, Jay went on to study philosophy, first at the University of Pennsylvania. He spent a year at Princeton, found it not to his liking, and returned to Penn, only to follow his mentor, Nelson Goodman, to Brandeis, where Jay earned his Ph.D. in Philosophy. After some years of teaching philosophy at Boston University, Jay began a working relationship with Bill and Frances Hackett, founders of a tiny publishing company in Indianapolis. The goal of the company was to serve the humanities, producing first-rate translations of classic works at affordable prices.

Jay was a visionary and saw what Hackett Publishing could become. When Bill died in 1986, Jay acquired the company, and it grew and prospered under his leadership. From its humble beginnings, the company is now one of the most highly respected publishers in the humanities, all while maintaining the character of the company Jay had envisioned. He never lost sight of the company’s mission: doing excellent work and putting people over profits. He was an astute businessman, a caring employer, and a man of integrity, boundless energy, and generosity.

Jay was a friend to all. A lifelong friendship with the renowned keyboardist Joseph Payne informed his love of music of all kinds and taught him the great art of listening. His ongoing friendships with fellow philosophers provided the intellectual stimulation he craved. But he was equally fascinated with the workings of a heating system, or a plumbing conundrum, and counted tradespeople as some of his closest friends.

Summers spent on a small island off the coast of Canada were a happy respite. Jay enjoyed nature. He found fulfillment in learning how to create and maintain his own home and in the deep friendships formed from the community that guided him through that process. The beautiful landscape was reminiscent of some of his most cherished places from his childhood, preserving his natural curiosity and wonder of the world.

Jay charted his own course through a life that encompassed many twists and turns. Through it all, his beloved wife, Eileen, and daughter, Frances (Frankie), made it all real for him and turned every day into a delight. Those are the people who will miss him most, but there are hundreds of others who have benefited from Jay’s kindness, generosity, wisdom, and sense of humor who will always remember fondly the wonderful guy who brought joy to their lives.

A celebration of life will be planned toward the end of the summer.