

Clifford M. Herman, M.D.

September 24, 1930 – August 3, 2007

He's standing at the top of the carpeted stairs in the Ballard restaurant, a drug rep-sponsored dinner, in his color-coordinated tweed jacket that complements the beige, worn carpet. I try to sneak past him to get to the bar and remain anonymous, like any surgery intern strives to be. "Hey Hugh, how you doing?" he asks. I am stunned, speechless. "He's talking to me," I think, incredulous, "a surgery intern?" He, the Professor, the Vietnam-seasoned Navy surgeon, scientist. I politely reply: "Uh, fine, thanks Dr. Herman."

You would have thought I was one of his old Navy buddies the way the conversation continued. "How's life?" "What rotation are you on now?" "How's the family?" "You like living in Seattle?" I relax, respond, my pulse slows. I am amazed. He really cared about me, remembered me from last summer when I was on his service. He spoke to me, an intern, like we were friends. Maybe I could stick with this thing, these five years of surgery residency, particularly if there were more like him.

Fast forward two years, I am running down the hall, winded after flights of stairs, chugging a can of Ensure as I go, fending off the inevitable 15 pounds of weight loss that stands as the best fringe benefit of the Harborview R3 rotation. Summer was tough, but for cryinoutloud, the holidays are equally frenetic! The voice

again: "Hey Hugh! Where you headed in such a hurry? Got a minute?" "Sure," I say. "Come with me, will you?" Okay, I think, I can do this for Dr. Herman. Probably some wound from hell he wants me to see. But he heads the wrong way; south, towards the center elevators, not north to the ward.

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The conversation, the kind, gentle inquisition ensues: "How's the wife?" "Getting ready for the holidays?" He says nothing of our destination as he pushes the button for the basement. "Basement?" I ponder. "There're no patients in the basement." The door opens, we turn right and head further south, past medical records, to a door marked "UWP." He opens the door to a wonderland of holiday decorations, laughter and the most incredible spread of food I had ever witnessed: casseroles, pancit, chicken adobo, dips, veggies, ham, roast beef – the works. The glorious food is only surpassed by the cheer and excitement that greet his arrival, even with a waif-like beggar of a surgery resident in tow. But after introductions, I am welcomed, this uninvited but obvious guest of their favorite doctor, Cliff. We leave full of food, but I am even more full of gratitude for the kindness of this great person, my attending surgeon who included me in his holiday lunch with his friends.

Several years pass. I am staring at the heavy metal blue-grey doors of the Operating Rooms, pounding the heel of my hand on my forehead in disbelief of my stupid oversight. It's 2 a.m.; the hypotensive, bleeding patient's asleep and I forgot to call the attending in the chaos of his ER work-up. Fortunately, tonight, the old sailor has the watch;

Cliff's got the duty. He answers the phone, safe and snug in his Tudor lair in north Juanita, an easy half hour away. He accepts my apology and spurs me on, "Go ahead and get started, you know what to do.

I'll be right there." Cool, calm, reassuring: Cliff.

Years later, he cons me into helping him review resident applications. "Good practice for the clerkship director" he muses. Next thing I know, he is passing the reins of the residency to me, which I accept with some trepidation. "Don't worry," he says, "you can do it. It's just taking care of people, making sure they get a fair deal." Dilemmas were plenty, there in the "department of loaves and fishes," as I had long considered it. Too many boxes to fill in the schedule, too few residents too fill them with. Unfortunately, I had no delusions that I had the skill and wisdom to pull off that gag, surely not like the guy in the original story, and surely not as well as Cliff had as program director.

He was the consummate administrator who could calm the seas of chaos with the organization of a skillfully crafted spreadsheet. Calm the fierce

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beast of an indignant, rabid, resident's spouse with his kind, listening ear. He dispelled the rumor mill and waning morale with his wonderful newsletter with its mushroom embellished header. "Demushrooming," he called it. Cliff was always working to make the surgery residency more transparent, more egalitarian and more of a family affair. He started the "SO" (Significant Others) group. Wives, husbands and "domestic associates" were regularly assembled to air their frustrations and build a circle of friends, confidants and allies in their often lonely and always challenging role as ground support for their frazzled resident loved ones. In the center of this whirlwind was Cliff; his sense of fairness born of the independence and principled New Hampshire heritage that was the core of his character.

There he is again, at my elbow with words of encouragement – me shaking in my boots as the new Program Director leading the first faculty retreat soon after the arrival of Dr. Pellegrini. I often sought Cliff's advice as I dealt with many problems as a program director, the most difficult dilemmas often concerned with the fate of struggling residents. My favorite bit of his advice was, of course, wrapped up in a story:

"The best boss I ever had was one of the most respected admirals in the Navy. He told me once when I was stuck with a difficult decision to send a young doctor off on a ship, or finagle a way so that he could stay with his wife who was about to deliver their first child. The ship was leaving port and there was no one else I could assign in his place. I took the problem to the "old



Three Generations of Residency Directors:
Hugh Foy, Karen Horvath, and Cliff Herman enjoy the 2005 Department Holiday Party

man" for advice. He looked at me and said, "Cliff, whenever you can, make the decision that is best for the individual, not the organization. If you put the individual first and the organization second, you will build an organization that is stronger in the long run, because you will win the trust of your people, even though the organization seems compromised at the present." Bolstered by that concept passed from Cliff, I came to believe in Providence. Not the hospital on Jefferson Street, but the concept that usually, somehow, something will arise that helps solve the problem.

Call it karma, grace, luck. What comes around goes around. I am fortunate to have been around a guy who seemed to make this elusive substance in spades. I am honored to consider Cliff Herman one of my best friends,

despite our difference in years. He was so much more than merely a mentor. In his last years, he became a strident advocate for the underserved and was very active in seeking ways to better distribute the great advances of medical care to all, regardless of their ability to pay. A champion of the little guy to the very end, a brave warrior, a kind doctor, a wise mentor and a wonderful friend.

This holiday season, rest assured, he is playing those carols on the piano for all of us. He still stands at the top of those stairs, waiting.

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