Doctors who do more than wear a white coat

Becoming a physician takes effort, and then, once you become one, there are the challenges of building a successful practice and getting involved in the community.

Three doctors are among those who stand out as some of my favorites for what they do.

Lori Mackstaller

You may know her as an internist at the University of Arizona’s Sarver Heart Center or as a clinical associate professor of medicine. It’s possible that you have viewed her on KVOA-TV 4’s newscasts at 4 p.m. as their medical expert or heard one of her healthy-heart lectures sponsored by The Bertram Z. and Hazel S. Brodie and Edwin J. Brach Foundation Endowed Lectureship for Heart Disease in Women.

This tall, slim, gorgeous woman “practices what I preached.” Weekend mornings begin with a spin class rather than hospital rounds. As she pedals miles, she is the only “bling-dressed” biker in the class. She can’t help herself. During clinic, patients would see her, if she were to remove her white jacket, coiffed and made up as if she had spent the afternoon shopping at Neiman Marcus.

Lori wouldn’t arrive in Arizona until 1974, when she enrolled in a Phoenix nursing school. Almost 25 years later, she made a life-changing decision. At the age of 47, she decided that she wanted to become a physician. She was the oldest medical student to graduate in 2000.

Following her residency at the University of Arizona, she remained there as an internist with Gordon Ewy’s heart team.

Lori Mackstaller

Clyde Robinson

“I’ve been here ever since, being the best periodontist I can possibly be, loving the hard work, enjoying my staff, and — most importantly — caring for my patients as if they were family.”
could get my husband, David, certified if I paired him with Lori as his “buddy.” I joined them for their open-water check in San Carlos, Mexico, along with each of our sons.

Arriving late at the condo where we were staying, the living room wall was inhabited by scorpions, the floors crawling with roaches. Lori helped both boys make it through the night — and through their successful dive checkout.

Her practice is full, perhaps because she provides “concierge service” without a fee. Recently a couple new to Tucson spent an hour each together in Lori’s UMC examining room.

In addition, she is a recent ITB Woman of Influence, financially supports the University of Arizona Dance School, UMC’s Emergency Room and Angel Charity (she is a former Ball chair), just a few of her service activities.

C. Harold Willingham

Clouds of dust follow Harold Willingham when he’s speeding through the desert on his Razor ATV. The doctor loves the outdoors, and when he wasn’t practicing orthopedic medicine (he’s now retired), he was traveling. Harold and Nancy, his wife of 57 years, and I joined Sally Drachman on one of her many Africa trips.

We were searching for chimpanzees in the forest of Mahale Mountains National Park in Tanzania. After successfully finding a number of troops, I discovered I had a blister on my foot. How fortunate to have a surgeon on our trip! Expecting him to whip out a scalpel, he instead handed me a bottle of Australian tea tree oil. The blister was gone the next day.

There wasn’t a camp we stayed in that the doctor’s services weren’t used by one of the locals.

In 1953, the Army gave him a deferment so he could attend medical school. Following his residency, he served as chief of orthopedic surgery at the Ft. Huachuca Army Hospital before entering private practice.

He loved Arizona and decided to stay. The decision was made easier in 1964, when the highly respected John Schwartzman suggested they open a practice together. In 1991, they opened Tucson Orthopedic Institute. It now has 33 orthopedic surgeons.

A longtime member of the Western Orthopedic Association, he held several offices including president in 1991 and has served on many committees.

The Willinghams have an endowment fund for resident education, the Harold and Nancy Willingham Award.

Several years ago, they contributed a courtyard to Tucson Medical Center’s pediatric ward. Nancy didn’t like one of the bare walls, so she had it painted with a mural and dedicated it to Harold.

He has been a Tucson Conquistador since 1968 and has served on the board.

The Willinghams have two children, in Tucson and Arkansas, and five grandchildren. His granddaughter Leslie is a physician in family practice, making her four generation of Willingham doctors.

After his 1997 retirement, he assisted in surgery for another five years.

“I have given so much advice to so many people over the years, that I can’t remember it all,” he says.

As Nancy says, he still receives calls. “These folks need an advocate and no one could be better-suited than Harold.”

Clyde Robinson

When Clyde Robinson attended University of Wisconsin in 68, literature piqued his interest more than science. Taking the requisite pre-med courses, he minored in French at the same time. When he attended Northwestern University Dental School, the draft was still in effect. The armed services made it attractive for him to enlist. He volunteered to join the Air Force during the Vietnam War.

Stationed in North Dakota and Guam, he served as a general dentist.

For his efforts, the GI Bill rewarded him by paying for his residency in periodontics at Boston University. After graduating, as much as he loved Boston and its intellectual stimulation, he longed for a warmer climate.

In 1975, with a map in hand and $500 in his pocket, Clyde drove to Tucson to take the Arizona dental exam boards. Staying with a classmate while waiting for the board results, he visited every periodontist in town. Leonard Weiner, who practiced at Tucson Medical Square on Tucson Boulevard with Charlie Jenkins and Steven Coleman, suggested, “Why don’t you just stay and work with us?” In 1984, Clyde built his current office on Rosemont Boulevard.

“I’ve been here ever since, being the best periodontist I can possibly be, loving the hard work, enjoying my staff, and — most importantly — caring for my patients as if they were family,” he says. It must be true, because Colleen Lancaster, Jane Polson, and hygienist Laurie Benefield have 20-plus years of working on the Robinson team.
My mother-in-law used to preach, “If you are not true to your teeth, they will be false to you.” I have followed her wisdom, but have to admit that my gums wouldn’t win any awards. I am on what Clyde calls his “frequent patient program,” and to my amazement, he has managed to save good ol’ #18, the bottom left-rear tooth, for more than a dozen years.

Recently, I was headed shark-diving in the Socorro Islands, a 30-hour boat ride from Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, to small, uninhabited islands in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. But the Saturday before my Monday departure, I felt that there was something foreign stuck in old #18. During 20 years of being a patient, I have never called for emergency help. Clyde wouldn’t let me go diving, not only because of the remoteness of my destination, but also because of the underwater pressure created on the teeth. He finally found an assistant and prepared me for possibly having the tooth pulled. Fortunately his suction device got the culprit, perhaps a forbidden kernel of popcorn. What a relief.

For the past 15 years, he has committed hundreds of hours to St. Elizabeth Dental Clinic.

He was a close friend of the late Larry Yasmer, who died unexpectedly of a heart attack. Larry had started a golf tournament to raise money for equipment and supplies for St. Elizabeth’s. Angel Charities gave them $500,000 to double the size of the 40-year old clinic, which doesn’t offer periodontal care. Instead, Clyde donates his time and money.

Some of my other favorite doctors are either too humble or shy to share their achievements.

One is longtime cardiologist Edward Byrne-Quinn, who recently retired and has been a neighborhood doctor for decades. He once saved a golfer who went into cardiac arrest on the nearby Tucson Country Club course, and made a house call when my son had the intestinal flu. It’s nice to have a neighbor like that.

Then there’s urologist Tom Hicks, a gentle man and an old-fashioned doctor who gives the time required for every patient. His contribution to humanity is his trips to North Africa to repair fistulas, a problem developed by young women who have been raped or given birth at young ages. The odor created by leaking urine results in their being abandoned by their families, and they can become outcasts for life without his help.

Tucson is fortunate to have so many good physicians and dentists. Unfortunately, we always need more. These are only a few who have meant a lot to me, either by their care or through some wonderful shared adventure.

Do you have an historical Tucson story to share? Contact Mary Levy Peachin at mary@peachin.com. Her historical columns appear the first week of each month in Inside Tucson Business.

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