

ALUMNI BULLETIN Jefferson

SIDNEY KIMMEL MEDICAL COLLEGE AT THOMAS JEFFERSON UNIVERSITY • SUMMER 2014



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Alumnus Profile

10 Questions with Walter L. McConnell, MD '59

As part of its spring 2014 senior lecture series, SUNY Adirondack invited residents in the Lake George area of upstate New York to campus every Tuesday from April 22 to May 13 to hear faculty and local experts speak on various topics. There were lessons in history, anthropology, local ornithology and one titled “Around the World — 10 Most Favorite Places.”

With the stamps of 110 countries in his passport, Walter McConnell, MD '59, was a fitting speaker to compile such a ranking.

McConnell's list includes the Tuscany region of Italy, Iguazu Falls in Argentina and Nepal, a country to which he has had close ties for nearly 40 years. In the late 1970s when he and his wife, Isabel, first visited the home of Mount Everest, McConnell caught the climbing bug.

In spring 1989, he returned to Nepal to ascend 29,029 feet above sea level to Everest's summit. McConnell and his climbing team set off on May 16 for the final push toward the peak. With his teammates out of sight and his headlight not working, he fell behind, waiting until sunrise to continue. He forgot to turn on his radio, so when the others realized he was not with them, they called base camp to say he was missing. After sunrise, McConnell climbed to 27,000 feet before turning back as he realized he would not reach the summit in a safe time.

His climbing mates continued to the summit, but on the descent the lead guide, Phudorje Sherpa, fell to his death. He left behind a 14-month-old son.

McConnell has since returned to the Himalayas a dozen times. In 1992 and 1993, he attempted Everest again from Tibet, but conditions didn't allow for a

climb to the summit. During his other trips to Nepal, McConnell has given back as a volunteer physician. He has worked in remote villages, delivering babies and caring for sick people and their animals.

McConnell has kept in contact with Phudorje's son, Dorje Sherpa, now 26, supporting him to ensure he received an education. In May 2014, Dorje, along with two women from Nepal, traveled to the United States to spend the summer at McConnell's home in the No. 1 most favorite place on his list, Lake George.

“We first came up to Lake George in 1962, and I said to my wife, ‘this is where we're going to retire,’” he says. When he stepped down in 1996 as director of emergency medicine at Dover General Hospital in Dover, N.J., they retreated to Bolton Landing, N.Y.

“It's absolutely beautiful here,” he says.

To read a complete list of McConnell's 10 favorite places, log on to Advancement.Jefferson.edu/mcconnell

1. What drew you to your specialty?

I think Jefferson was responsible for me going into primary care. It was emphasized when I was going to school there, and a lot of my classmates went into primary care. Over time, my practice group got too big. We got taken over by carpetbaggers who only cared about the bottom line. That's not why I got into practice. I ended up leaving and going into emergency medicine.

2. If you could work for a year in any location in the world, where would you do it?

Nepal. I've gone there 12 times. Once I helped with the Nepal Ministry of Health on a medical study and twice for the Himalayan Rescue Association

in the remote village of Manang. I gave altitude lectures, delivered babies and even took care of their animals. I've gone back to the village and reconnected with kids I delivered, people I took care of and even a horse I took care of. It was 10 years after I cared for the horse, and the owner brought him to where I was staying, and he rubbed my face against mine. He hadn't forgotten me.

3. What was your first job?

My dad set an example to work hard. From a young age, I took care of lawns, shoveled snow, parked cars at the local theater, then worked as a soda jerk at the local soda shop.

4. What's on your bucket list (personally or professionally)?

I have a few countries I haven't been to: Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam.

5. If you had a theme song, what would it be?

My favorite song is Frank Sinatra's “I Did It My Way.” That's how I've tried to live my life.

6. What is the best decision you ever made?

I met my wife the first week in college. When we went out on our first date, I dropped her off and said “let's go steady.” We got married the week after graduation in 1953.

7. What is the most adventurous thing you have ever done?

Going to Everest. I went in 1989 from Nepal and twice from Tibet in 1992 and 1993. My climbing leader Scott Fischer in 1989 died on Everest in 1996 along with a well-respected guide from New Zealand, Rob Hall, whom I met in 1989.



Photo by M. Cheri Bordelon

No one summited either of those trips from Tibet.

8. What gets you out of bed in the morning?

My morning bike rides or runs. When I was 30 years old, I was 65 pounds overweight and smoked. I didn't want to live like that, so I started running and I've been running ever since, all over the world.

9. What is your biggest pet peeve?

Where our country is going with health care. I was the executive producer of a documentary called "Money-Driven

Medicine," which was produced by Alex Gibney and shown on "Nightline" on ABC and "Bill Moyers Journal" on PBS. We had the opportunity to show the documentary in the Capitol auditorium, and we invited every member of Congress. Only one senator showed up. The rest sent their assistants so we had a full house. As is discussed in the film, I believe we need to start looking at a patient as an individual and teaching wellness and prevention. I think our healthcare system needs a lot of work, and we need a big change in Washington.

10. What is the proudest moment of your career?

While I was practicing in my hometown, Dover, N.J., I had five high-school teachers choose me as their primary care physician. I had the opportunity to deliver the children of five classmates and saw at least half of my high-school class while I was a primary care doctor. My proudest moment, though, was watching my son Jeffrey graduate from Jefferson in 1985.

— Stacey Miller