



DAVE KLIEWER: HOSPICE FOUNDER TO HOSPICE PATIENT

Caring Times, Spring 2007

by Karen Nousen

Dave Kliewer was a remarkable man. He has impacted our community in many ways: physician, city councilor, environmentalist, philanthropist.

Dave Kliewer was also one of the founders of Benton Hospice Service. Along with his wife, Jean, and a handful of other community members, Dave found in the hospice movement a means to address the need for compassionate, respectful end-of-life care. After being admitted to hospice care as a patient late last summer, Dave was able to see firsthand how his vision for hospice matched up to the reality.

Sharing and hope make all the difference

Dave Kliewer was born on an Indian reservation in eastern Montana, where his parents were Mennonite missionaries. He learned from them the importance of sharing what you have with the community. Dave and his brother Paul eventually left the reservation to go to school, struggling through the Depression to complete their undergraduate degrees. While they both dreamed of becoming doctors, there wasn't enough money for them both to go to medical school. So on graduation day, Dave and Paul flipped a coin to see who would go on to medical school and who would help to pay for it. Paul won the toss.

Dave joined the Marines to get flight training to prepare for an eventual career as a commercial pilot. He was assigned to an elite fighting squadron and sent to Hawaii. A week before Pearl Harbor was attacked, Dave's unit was sent to Wake Island. They were attacked the morning of December 7 and battled through two weeks of intense bombing and combat. The Marines repulsed the first land attack, giving the U.S. its first victory in the Pacific, but were finally captured and taken prisoner by the Japanese.

Dave spent the next four years as a prisoner of war. He described life as a POW as "unspeakably difficult." He recalled "During that time, I kept hope and my vision of becoming a doctor right in front of me. I think that determination and persistence gave me the strength to survive." He traded two cups of rice and a pack of cigarettes for a copy of *Gray's Anatomy*, a medical textbook, and then memorized it. During these years, he was allowed to write only a few letters. One of them he addressed to Harvard Medical School to make an informal application.

Two weeks after the war ended, Dave and the other POWs were released. Dave said he was in "pretty good shape—except for the starvation." While recuperating at Camp Adair, his main activity was eating. After six months, he was able to attend OSU for the classes he would need for medical school. Then he flew to Boston to formalize his

application to Harvard. Initially, he was told it would take months to process his application. Once they found out he was the soldier who had written to them from a prisoner of war camp, however, the Harvard Medical School administrators quickly admitted Dave—they all remembered the letter from the POW camp, but no one had ever expected to see its author.

After graduating from Harvard, Dave interned at Cornell Medical Center in New York City, where he met Jean, who was a nurse there. Dave and Jean married and moved to Boston, Seattle, Hawaii, eventually settling in Corvallis where Dave joined the Corvallis Clinic.

Over the course of his career as a hematologist and internist, Dave observed the behavior some people displayed towards the dying. “When a person was told he or she was incurable, nurses came less frequently, the family visited less often, and sometimes physicians and hospital staff denied them services,” Dave remembered. “There was an attitude that terminal patients couldn’t be helped by the medical community and so should just be left to die their own painful deaths.” Dave’s hard won lessons about the importance of hope applied to dying patients as well. “Hope enables people to survive great difficulties. Hope can signify a good, meaningful life, even if that life is short.”

Bringing hospice to Corvallis

“When we arrived in Corvallis, there was already a great deal of interest in hospice,” Jean recalled. “Dave and I were interested in running a pilot study to see just what this hospice movement was like.” Dave believed a patient’s own doctor and nurse were best suited to care for a person at the end of life. Initially Jean and Dave cared for a few patients themselves, often making home visits by bike.

They quickly learned they couldn’t do it alone. They gathered a group of interested community members and began the conversation that led to the formation of Benton Hospice Service in 1979. Growth has been steady over the years. Dave explained, “For a long time we were just a group of volunteers, then we had an executive director, and now it’s quite a large organization.” Dave was Medical Director for some years, and both he and Jean served as Board Members and Chairs. “The patient remains in control of his own life and the family is an integral part of the whole hospice experience,” said Dave. “I think that the original mission for hospice has been maintained over the last twenty-five years.”

In spite of Dave’s key involvement with BHS, he never envisioned himself as a hospice patient. Dave experienced “a moment of reluctance” when his physician suggested that *he* consider hospice. “Now that I am being served by hospice, I understand even more how important the family and caregivers are to carrying out hospice’s mission,” Dave noted. “I realize I am still being treated like a person; I have not been abandoned. Seeing that the kind of care that I am getting right now reflects our initial enthusiasm and dedication to compassionately caring for the patient is amazing.”

“We feel that we have benefited greatly,” Jean said. “For much of our lives we have talked about how we would take care of each other until the end of our lives. It certainly has been made much easier and much more meaningful with hospice to help us.”

Being known as a war hero because of his courage during the battle at Wake Island and four years as a POW was not comfortable for Dr. Kliever. “War isn’t something to celebrate,” according to Dave. Still, the experience of being a POW taught him important lessons about hope, determination, and living every day fully. These lessons guided Dave down the path that led him to become a doctor and eventually a founder of Benton Hospice Service. That makes him a hero to us.

Dr. Dave Kliever died peacefully in March, a week after his 90th birthday. We are grateful for Dave and Jean’s assistance in preparing this article, which they were able to read and approve before he died. He will be missed.