



A Giant has Passed

Norman M. Christensen, M.D.

1923 - 2018

Memorial by:

John VanSpeybroeck, M.D.

“We are like dwarves sitting on the shoulders of giants. We see more, and things that are more distant, than they did, not because our sight is superior or because we are taller than they, but because they raise us up, and by their great stature add to ours.” John of Salisbury

Norman McKenzie Christensen died on August 13, 2018, having recently turned 95 years of age. He had been in failing health for the past few months. Those who knew Norm (AKA Chris) were not surprised he chose to leave the way he wanted. As his daughter Ann wrote “Dad died this morning about 8:30 a.m. A bluebird family bathing in the birdbath, Acorn Woodpeckers @ the feeder, Ravens calling in the gulch. Light streaming in their windows. Surrounded with spacious love. It was a good morning to die.”

He is survived by his loving wife of almost 71 years, Sally. and by his five children Scott, Ann, Kate, Cort, and Sarah. He was grandfather to Ella, Isaac, Jake, Caitlin, Claire, Peter, Lucy, and Slater and great-grandfather of Rowan and Talus. He leaves a sister Lynette Anderson and numerous more distant relatives both in and outside of the US. His two dogs, Circe and Zach, the last of a long line of the luckiest dogs in Humboldt County, will miss him greatly. He and Sally were justly proud of this remarkable family.

He was born in 1923 in Berkeley, CA. His father was a minister, making him a PK (Preacher’s Kid). He graduated from Stanford, He then went to Stanford Medi-

cal School, graduating in 1948. He spent time in Japan during the Korean War while serving in the Navy. He then did his surgery residency at Stanford, primarily on the Stanford Service at San Francisco General Hospital. A fisherman since he was a small child, the lure of the rivers of Northern California called him to Eureka in 1955. As was usual at that time he went into solo private practice. He shared call with Joe Walsh who had preceded him in Eureka. They decided to join together and formed a partnership in 1961. Norm then worked with Joe, George Husband, Tom Rydz and myself until his retirement in 1991.

Norm was the most honest person I have ever met. He did not suffer fools gladly. He supported people and causes he believed in. He did not care what others thought or how this would affect his career as long as he felt the cause was just. He was a counselor for Save the Redwoods League. He was influential in preventing the damming of the Mad River (Damn the Dam) despite much public support for the project. He fought (and lost) for female admission to membership in the Ingomar Club. These were not popular positions to take in Eureka during the 1950’s to 80’s, but he felt they were the right positions.

He was an outdoorsman at his core. He was a skier, backpacker, nature photographer. He was a fly fisherman extraordinaire. I saw a picture of him fishing when he was about 3. He didn’t stop for the next 90 years. He taught countless others (including all of his children and my wife) how to fly fish the rivers of the world. He was an early and dedicated environmentalist. He knew

that the land and waters must be protected so that future generations could enjoy them as he did. He joined the Sierra Club as a teen and stayed an active member. He was a generous supporter of the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, Trust for Public Land, North Umqua Foundation and numerous other groups preserving the land and water. Even though he was a PK (see above) his church was the outdoors.



Medically he was a gifted surgeon. He treated tissue gently, exposed his operative field perfectly, and worked efficiently without wasted movement. More importantly, his surgical judgment on when or when not to operate was impeccable. He was the perfect senior partner and mentor to me. He could be frustrated by those who were not as perfectionist as he was. He didn’t get the nickname “Stormin’ Norman” because he was interested in the weather. He wanted the best for his patients.

He was recognized not only locally but nationally. He was one of the first rural private practice surgeons to be admitted to the prestigious Pacific Coast Surgical Association. Even more than being a member,

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North Coast Physician

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he served as president of the PCSA in 1992. He was an examiner for the American Board of Surgery. He was a member of the Western Surgical Association. He was Clinical Professor of Surgery at UCSF and UCD. When UCD called about the VA Hospital in Martinez needing a temporary Chief of Surgery in the late 70's, he took over that position for six months until a permanent chief was hired. He was a visiting professor at San Francisco General Hospital multiple times in the 70's and 80's, closing the circle from his training time there. Locally he served on numerous boards and committees including being President of the Humboldt Medical Society. He was instrumental in developing the local Tumor Board. He was deeply involved in developing NorCal Insurance during the medical malpractice

crisis of the mid 70's. More recently he was on the Hospice of Humboldt Board, helping them fund their new facilities.

He was one of the most curious people I have ever known. It was a treat to go to his house when he was in his 90's and see books on the evolution of the eye, world history, and biographies interspersed with the journal Science, Science News, the New Yorker, Smithsonian, New York Review of Books, etc. Last year he decided to reread The Odyssey and The Iliad just to compare his thoughts about the books from when he was a younger man.

To sum up Norm in a few paragraphs does not do justice to his 95 years. He was his own person. The world is a better place because of him. I will miss him dearly.

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