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**Remembering My Friend
By James L. Holly, MD
Your Life Your Health
The Examiner
March 26, 2009**



**Mark A. Wilson, M.D.
April 4, 1955 – March 23, 2009**

He called and said, “Can I come to your home and talk to you?” I was alarmed. Several physicians had just left SETMA and I wondered if perhaps the stress had caused him to rethink his future. In 13 years, he had never made a call like this; I could not imagine what he was going to say. As we sat in my living room on a sofa, he said the words which shall ring through my mind all of my life, “I have terminal cancer.” I listened. For two hours, he talked. I listened. The only thing which caused his voice to break and brief tears to come was when he talked about his three children. That would be a pattern which be repeated again and again for the next nineteen months. We lamented that what we had to start together would have to be carried on by one alone. We agreed that we had both expected for him to survive me. We laughed when he said, “I expected to bury you.”

I was and am so proud of my partners at SETMA, as they unselfishly and spontaneously, without regard to their interests, immediately took steps to maximize their support for our friend and his family, professionally, emotionally and financially. They NEVER wavered from that for the next nineteen months.

I think everyone expected our friend to go through the various stages of grieving over the inevitable. There are various iterations of those stages but one is:

1. Shock and denial
2. Pain and guilt
3. Anger and bargaining
4. Depression, reflection, loneliness
5. The upward turn
6. Reconstruction and working through
7. Acceptance and hope

But, traveling a road different from that traveled by others, as was the habit of his life, he fooled all of us. He decided to skip the first six steps and lived from the announcement of his illness in “acceptance and hope.” Interestingly, his hope did not stem from confidence in chemotherapy or his expectation of long-term survival; his hope was in his spontaneously joyful confession, “Even with this, I consider myself the luckiest person on earth. I would not change anything in my life even if I could.”

That contentment would lead him through countless treatments, which were really done for others, not for him. He often said, “If I don’t do this, my family will think I have given up.” So, he continued treatments, which he knew were not helping. And lest someone think that they should feel guilty about that, remember, this was his gift to us. We received it with thanksgiving and our hearts are warmed by it to this day. As we grieve over his loss, we must not denigrate his gift by feeling anything but overwhelming gratitude. He never stopped giving and what he gave is what we needed.

A month after his diagnosis, on September 11, 2008, he sent a note to his colleagues. He had been given a prognosis of three months without treatment and nine-months with treatment, but his focus was not on himself; it was upon others. He said:

“Some things are difficult to put into words and there is no right or wrong way to tell you what you need to know. For some time I have not felt well and several weeks ago I was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Unfortunately, it has spread to my liver. I am being treated at MD Anderson and therefore will be out of the office more than usual.

“I feel well most of the time and look forward to continuing my practice even though I will not work quite the hours that I usually do. I want you to know that my partners could not be more supportive of me and my family and I am grateful for that. My friends and family are a great support at this time as well.

“I want you to know how proud I am of SETMA and of each one of you. Without a doubt for me professionally SETMA has been the best thing that ever happened to me. I will be grateful for your prayers. I will let you know from time to time how I am doing.

“I feel very fortunate to be surrounded by my wife and my children and by people who love me, who care for me and who support me, and, no matter what the future holds, today I am a blessed man.”

In October, he received a letter from a local healthcare administrator. It is typical of hundreds of expressions; it said:

“Thank you for your heartfelt letter. I remember the day in my office when you shared with me your goals for the highest quality of professional care for long-term care facilities. I count it a privilege to have not only seen the achievement of that goal, but also to be the recipient of the outstanding services provided by the SETMA team.

“The efforts of this exceptional team affect every aspect of the care we provide to our residents and their families. Your pride in the support SEMTA gives nursing facilities is certainly warranted. I, too, have absolute confidence in your colleagues and your SETMA team, and I will continue to do everything possible to support their efforts in our facility.

“And, please know how very grateful I am to have received the excellent medical care you and your office team have provided me personally for so many years. All of you have more than met my every need and expectation of a personal physician. My heart and prayers are with you all as you support one another during this time.”

We shared many experiences. How many times do I remember him saying, “My goal is to make you, your family, your children and their children successful?” And, he worked at that constantly. He loved my son, which for me was better than loving me. He spent time with him, and often, when I was particularly hard on my son; my friend consoled him. He was generous with my son-in-law and daughter. He always wanted them to do well. By his example each of his partners pledges to “be there” for his sons and daughter for whatever their needs may be.

I once told my friend that until I met him, I had never met a man who was as generous as my father. This bombastic man who could show anger easily, just as easily shed tears over a sad story or the needs of a child. It would frustrate others at times, but while my friend wanted to succeed, he was not driven by wealth or prosperity for himself. I learned how long, he wanted to be a physician and realized why he was so deeply wounded when MD Anderson told him he had to give up practicing medicine. While another physician will soon occupy his office, as long as our friend was with us, his

office remained his to use as he wished. And, it will always be “his office,” no matter who occupies it.

He reluctantly attended the Houston Nutcracker Ballet with us and then looked forward to it each year. His children loved the ballet. In December, 2008, we attended our last ballet together, but I hope his family will go next year and the next and.... When we went to the Metropolitan Opera together in New York City, he was classic. Noticing the streaming libretto on the back of the seat in front of him, he said, “Look, darling, it’s a sing-a-long.” We all laughed and I was grateful that he did not (sing-a-long). When the first act was over, he exclaimed, “It’s halftime, where’s the beer.” I laughed again. I told him that if he survived, on the tenth anniversary of his diagnosis, I would publicly drink a beer. On August 26, 2017, I shall fulfill that promise as his memory will survive forever.

In August, 2008, I wrote a note to several of our closest friends and said:

“This afternoon, we had an hour together. We wish to, and, we shall, finish our pilgrimage together well. With mutual trust, respect, love and commitment, we shall face the future. We laughed, and we cried.

“We shall miss each other and I shall never have a partner or friend like him again. Losing my father was the hardest thing I have every faced. Losing my friend will be the second. I have asked him to stop going to the hospital and to come to the office to visit only when he wishes. I have asked him to become a roving ambassador for SETMA with Nursing Homes, physicians and with the community. He wants to do that. He is a good man.

God speed to my friend and partner; we shall finish well, together.”

On March 13, 2009, I sent the following note to my friend and subsequently read it to him:

“Just now, I have seen the end of the 1969 version of the movie, ‘Goodbye Mr. Chips.’ You may remember that in 1939, the first ‘Good-bye Mr. Chips’ was released. Robert Donat won the best actor award that year for playing Mr. Chips and it is well worth watching. Donat was competing against *Gone with the Wind* and Clark Gable. At end of the 1969 version, Mr. Chips walks from his “rooms” where he is retired, back to the school where he taught for over 50 years. He had just been visited by a small boy whose great grandfather had been taught by Mr. Chips.

As Chips, walks down the road, he remembers his wife, long deceased, and he sings to himself the following song which had been recorded by his co-star, Petula Clark. The lyrics are:

“In the morning of my life I shall look to the sunrise.
At a moment in my life when the world is new.

And the blessing I shall ask is that God will grant me,
To be brave and strong and true,
And to fill the world with love my whole life through.

(Chorus)

“And to fill the world with love
And to fill the world with love
And to fill the world with love my whole life through

“In the noontime of my life I shall look to the sunshine,
At a moment in my life when the sky is blue.
And the blessing I shall ask shall remain unchanging.
To be brave and strong and true,
And to fill the world with love my whole life through

(Chorus)

“In the evening of my life I shall look to the sunset,
At a moment in my life when the night is due.
And the question I shall ask only I can answer.
Was I brave and strong and true?
Did I fill the world with love my whole life through?”

“Chips changed one phrase in the song. In the third stanza, which stated, “Was I brave and strong and true?” he sang, thinking of his wife, “Was I brave and strong like you?” It was a melancholy moment, and, of course, I thought of the courage and character of our own friend. As I am much older than him, and as I know that someday, I will face the “sunset” of my life, I suspect that I cannot and will not do it as well as he has done.

“He has set a high standard for us all and I believe God has blessed him with longer life as a result of his sweet spirit. We shall continue to pray for him as he goes home from the hospital today.

“God bless you, my friend. YOU ARE a re**MARK**able man!!!!”

My dear friend, as your partners instantly changed legal documents to benefit your and your family upon the announcement of your illness; at the announcement of your passing, they determined to rename the SETMA West Clinic to The Mark A. Wilson Clinic. As has been the case throughout these days, we honor ourselves by honoring you. Farewell, dear friend. You shall never be far from our thoughts. We shall love you forever.