

Dr. Leo Charendoff led his life with gusto

By: Lee Sawyer, Journal Inquirer
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A man of many passions, a mentor, and an intellectual: that's how friends and colleagues are describing Dr. Leo Charendoff, a local physician who died Thursday at 75 after a hard-fought battle with cancer.

"He was kind of a Renaissance man in many ways, he was not just a dabbler - he made it his business to learn everything he could about his passions," his son, Bruce Charendoff, said.

Charendoff was the founder of Associated Urologists on East Center Street, and held posts as chief of urology, chief of surgery, and chief of staff at Manchester Memorial Hospital. He retired in 2000.

Born in Toronto, Canada, in 1931, he came to the United States after medical school and settled in Manchester with his wife, Elaine, in 1962. He maintained close ties to his family and friends in Canada, summering every year at a cottage on Lake Muskoka in Ontario.

A licensed pilot, Charendoff was known to take friends on jaunts in his four-seat Beechcraft Bonanza just for fun. "He loved to just go poke holes in the sky," his son said. "He and his friends would go look for the best lunch place in New England."

The doctor had customized both his plane and his sailboat at Lake Muskoko to maximize their efficiency. Enamored not only with the freedom and thrill of flying and sailing, Charendoff also was fascinated by the physics involved, his son said. "He had the imagination and vision to design things, to fix things, to build models of things," Bruce said.

Once, when builders were having a tough time understanding the doctor's vision for an elaborate stairway in his Manchester home, he built a meticulously scaled mock-up out of Popsicle sticks and tongue depressors, his son recalled.

A surgeon with a keen scientific understanding, the doctor also was an artist, as evidenced by the photographs of exotic locales that hung in his office.

"I always took time to admire those pictures," Rabbi Richard Plavin of Temple Beth Shalom, Charendoff's synagogue said. "He had a very artistic talent for photography."

Charendoff built his own darkroom to develop his pictures, and when digital photography came into vogue, he became an early and accomplished expert with Photoshop software to enhance his art.

"He never considered himself too old to learn new things," his son said. "He was a life-long learner."

Charendoff also used his computer to e-mail Plavin and others essays and political commentaries he found interesting, and his family remembers his interest in politics and current events as yet another of his passions.

A staunch Democrat, Charendoff was never afraid to mix it up with those he disagreed with, enjoying political debates, even when they became heated, family members said.

"He had very strong views, but he was a very thoughtful guy who did not spout a lot of half-baked ideas you often hear," his son said.

His family said Charendoff was acutely interested in social justice, and above all, cared about his country. "The president's approval rating went up a little tick now that my dad's not around anymore," his son said with a laugh.

A member of Temple Beth Sholom since 1962, Charendoff was concerned about issues affecting the Jewish people, once flying with Plavin to a Washington, D.C., rally in support of Jews who were oppressed under the Soviet regime.

"He was very proud of his Jewish identity, and he was a generous member of the temple," Plavin said.

One of the doctor's defining characteristics, family members said, was his willingness to take the time to teach and mentor others. His colleagues agreed.

"He was a great teacher, and he was always there to help you," Thomas Staley, a partner at Associated Urologists, said.

Under Charendoff's leadership, the practice grew to five doctors, and "everyone who has started there has stayed, which is extraordinary," Staley said.

According to Staley, it was Charendoff's wisdom and his commitment to fairness that helped his practice grow. "He really set the standard for the care in our department, and he was really the father of modern urology east of the river," Staley said.

As a practitioner, Charendoff had an extraordinary bedside manner, and upon his retirement in 2000 maintained contact with many of his patients, enjoying the time he now had to "get to know them as whole people," his son said.

Recently, Staley got a call from Charendoff asking about a former patient of his that Staley was now treating. "He was quizzing me, so I guess they must have kept in touch," Staley said.

When Charendoff was diagnosed with cancer in 2005, friends in the profession rallied to help him however they could, and the doctor himself approached the difficult battle with persistent will to survive.

"He pursued his survival with the same kind of passion he did everything else in his life," his rabbi said.

Not one to let illness dampen his lust for life, Charendoff sought vigorous treatment, while still enjoying his favorite pursuits in his remaining months of life, his family said.

In his final days, Charendoff was able to say goodbye to loved ones, and faced his passing with dignity and grace, family members said.

Besides wife Elaine and son Bruce, Charendoff is survived by another son, Steve, of Philadelphia; a daughter Pamela of Wyomissing, Penn.; a brother Melvin Charendoff of Toronto; and eight grandchildren.

His funeral will be at 1 p.m. Sunday at Temple Beth Sholom, 400 E. Middle Turnpike, Manchester. A Memorial Period will be observed at his home at 135 Steep Hollow Lane, Manchester, from Sunday after the funeral until Tuesday evening.

The family is asking that any memorial contributions be made to the John A. DeQuattro Community Cancer Center at Manchester Memorial Hospital, 71 Haynes St., or Temple Beth Sholom, or the charity of the donor's choice.

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CHARENDOFF, DR. LEO

Dr. Leo Charendoff, 75, of Manchester, CT and Boynton Beach, FL, passed away on Thursday (December 14, 2006) at Manchester Memorial Hospital. He was born in Toronto, Canada on June 15, 1931. He was married to Elaine (Levitz) Charendoff for 48 years and was the son of the late Samuel and Minnie Charendoff of Toronto. A graduate of the University of Toronto and its medical school, he completed his internship and residencies at hospitals in Toronto, Boston and New York, and started his Urology practice in Manchester in 1962. At Manchester Memorial Hospital, he was formerly Chief of Urology, Chief of Surgery, and Chief of Staff. He was also on the urological staff of Rockville General Hospital. He was a talented surgeon who improved and extended the lives of countless patients and who mentored numerous physicians and staff throughout his distinguished career. As a young man, he served as a Surgeon Sub-Lieutenant in the Royal Canadian Navy. Among his many interests, he was an instrument rated pilot, an accomplished sailor, an expert photographer, an ardent bridge and Scrabble player, an enthusiastic golfer and a creative do-it-yourselfer, especially at the family cottage. He enjoyed 40 wonderful summers with his loving family and friends on Lake Muskoka in Ontario, Canada. His talent, his brilliance and his companionship will be greatly missed. He is survived by his wife Elaine, sons Bruce (Pamela Dempsey) of Washington, DC and Steven of Philadelphia, PA, daughter Pamela (Dr. Jonathan Primack) of Wyomissing, PA, and eight adored grandchildren -- Sally, Caroline, Cecelia, Olivia, Jonathan, Ila, Andrew and Benjamin - who in turn adored their "Bebop." He is also survived by his brother Dr. Melvin Charendoff of Toronto, sisters-in-law Evelyn Charendoff, Janet Charendoff and Ilona Levitz, and brother-in-law Martin Levitz. His brother Morrie Charendoff predeceased him. He is also survived by many loving family members in both the United States and Canada. The family expresses its gratitude for the outstanding medical and nursing care provided at MMH. It was a comfort for him to be cared for by so many friends and former colleagues. Funeral services will be held on Sunday at 1 pm at Temple Beth Sholom, 400 East Middle Turnpike, Manchester. Memorial contributions can be sent to the John A. De Quattro Community Cancer Center at Manchester Memorial Hospital, 71 Haynes Street, Manchester, CT 06040, Temple Beth Sholom, or the charity of the donor's choice.