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Title In memoriam: Bill Pipkin

Event

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Notes William Pipkin was Henderson's Asst Dean for Administration. Among other contributions, he had a major role in introducing computers into the School at an early date. Pipkin was a hemophiliac in the early days of HIV/AIDS. He endured multiple joint replacements before succumbing to the disease.

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IN MEMORIAM -- BILL PIPKIN

28 October 1995

I especially appreciate the privilege of being with you here today to say a few words to remember one of the best friends I have ever had, but, at the same time, I am mindful that Bill had not only a very special family -- Dorothy, Stephen, Diane, Nancy, Michael, Patra, Patrick and Aimee -- but a very much larger Hopkins family which began in the School of Hygiene and extended across East Baltimore and the Homewood Campus to the Credit Union, the Faculty Club and I suspect about a dozen other special affiliations which I never knew. I was a better person specifically because of Bill Pipkin; I know the school of Hygiene was a better School because of him and, to skip a few intermediate points, the world itself was a better place. The same cannot be said of many people.

I first met Bill some 17 years ago. I had returned to the United States from 10 years in Geneva and the World Health Organization to become Dean of a world-renowned School of Public Health. My only previous contact with the academic world had been as a student. I had never so much as occupied a faculty position. I knew a lot about smallpox but that information somehow or other didn't seem terribly relevant. In brief, I needed help -- and urgently.

From my days in Geneva I had carried the firm conviction that a capable administrator had to be the most important person one recruited in embarking on a major responsibility such as this. I asked the University's Vice-president for Administration as to who was the most capable person at Hopkins whom I could recruit (outside of himself, of course), and, without hesitation, he said, "Bill Pipkin -- if you can persuade him."

I asked Bill to meet with me and, at the end of the meeting, asked if he would assume the position of Assistant Dean for Administration. He seemed rather skeptical but finally agreed. He warned me, however, that it would not be for more than three years. He pointed out that he had never served in any position for more than two to three years before seeking new fields to conquer. It was a quite incredible interview. But how could one resist a guy like this? So we agreed -- three years. And so the first Assistant Dean for administration was appointed -- the first at the School of Hygiene and the first in the history of the University. Today -- all Schools at Hopkins now have Deans for Administration. It just takes one imaginative and competent person to cast a new world.

Bill's three years with me and the School actually turned into 14 years -- which is perhaps only another way of saying that the new Dean had succeeded admirably in creating so many crises and problems that Bill never got bored.

Apart from Bill's puckish humor and ever-present sunny smile, three special facets of Bill's character deserve mention -- the teacher-student, the philosopher and the visionary manager. Bill had the firm conviction that an inspired teacher could teach

absolutely anybody absolutely anything, and that a motivated student could learn essentially anything. As we moved into the early 1980s, smaller, more powerful computers appeared on the scene. Most faculty and staff were intimidated by the new beasts and not very receptive to change. Bill, the student, however, almost literally devoured the manuals, explored the systems and within months of deciding he would learn computing, was regularly being consulted by regional technical and sales staff from the computer companies. Bill, the inspired teacher, could be as relentless and insistent as a toothache. He revelled in this role and never faltered. With a mixture of sunny optimism, wit, imagination and sheer persistence which would be the envy of a used-car salesman, he managed to teach even those who didn't want to learn. He masterminded the development of the School's computer systems which are acknowledged even today to be more sophisticated than brethren schools in East Baltimore.

Bill's management style was a carefully considered and philosophically-based approach which, when pressed, he would elaborate upon with both wit and insight. It was, in essence, steel hand in velvet glove. He knew well whenever he went into a meeting precisely what results he wanted but this was seldom obvious to others. As the meeting unfolded, one was regularly surprised to see all manner of friendly and not so friendly forces espousing Bill's arguments while Bill smiled and, as the apparently neutral participant, gently guided the decisions to the logical ends he foresaw. More people than you could ever imagine left meetings fully convinced that their thoughtful insights had inspired the brilliant new directions and conclusions. Publicly, Bill only smiled that well-known smile of his which was as characteristic as the smile of a Cheshire cat. Privately, he took immense satisfaction in the many new policies and directions at School and University of which he was actually author.

The third aspect of Bill's character -- that of visionary manager -- was the attribute which uniquely benefitted the School and led to his being drafted to head the Johns Hopkins Club, the Federal Credit Union, United Way campaigns and who knows how many other University-associated activities. Bill was the one person whom virtually every University management committee sought to include in discussions -- the cool, dispassionate, analytic, insightful eye of Bill Pipkin being all but irreplaceable. However, I must say that his Dean more than once cast a somewhat jaundiced, jealous eye on these varied commitments. However, Bill seemed to have a limitless capacity to take on all manner of functions and to do each well. How he achieved this became apparent, in part, when he was hospitalized to have a new knee implanted. He had told me the week before that he would have to miss a Monday morning committee meeting -- "a little problem to be worked out at the hospital." Bill was persistently vague as to what that problem was but certainly I never heard the words "major surgery". By Monday afternoon, the patient's room housed his computer, two telephone lines, banks of files and a steady parade of scheduled appointments. I am told that he had argued the issue of installing at least one telephone line and a computer in the recovery room but was rebuffed. Bill devoted himself wholeheartedly to whatever he did and to those he worked with.

Bill was the consummate teacher and, in truth, I suspect that this really is the way he wished to be recognized. And indeed he taught us all a great deal about many things -- with very special lessons about courage and optimism in the face of all but numbing adversity and about loyalty and commitment to those one knows and loves. Thanks, Bill -- from all of us.