

[From the Louisville Courier-Journal, Feb. 4, 2005]

A PASSION FOR EXCELLENCE; U OF L DOCTOR LEAVES ENDURING MARK TRAINING SURGEONS
(By Laura Ungar)

Part drill sergeant, part modern-dayocrates, Dr. Hiram C. Polk Jr. briskly led medical residents and students through University Hospital on early morning rounds this week.

Stopping in front of patients' rooms, Polk called on residents to describe each case, then peppered them with questions.

Sometimes he offered a compliment, such as "Wonderful question" or "That's exactly right." But more often, he displayed a characteristic toughness, and his trainees usually answered, "Yes, sir."

"You're lost," he admonished the group outside one patient's room.

"You're not betting your life," he said to a resident assessing a patient. "You're betting his life."

Polk is stepping down today after more than three decades as chairman of the University of Louisville's surgery department, where he has trained a legion of surgeons—about 230, which U of L officials say is more than any other current surgical chair in the country.

Colleagues say a relentless push for excellence marked Polk's tenure. That has given U of L's program a national reputation as the Marine Corps of surgical residencies and left him with a nickname based on one instance from his early career: "Hiram Fire-em."

But it also has made him a teacher students always remember, a strict father figure who strives to make them better and leaves them with an internal voice telling them to push themselves.

"Dr. Polk demands excellence from his trainees and will not accept mediocrity. And by demanding it, he often gets it," said Dr. Kelly McMasters, a former resident under Polk who is now the Sam and Lolita Weakley Professor of Surgical Oncology and director of U of L's division of surgical oncology.

Polk could go a little too far, "could be too tough," said Dr. Frank Miller, a professor of surgery at U of L.

But Polk makes no apologies. Surgery "is a serious, big deal and you need to take that seriously," he said. "Striving to be the best you can be sometimes means telling people, 'I think that's stupid.'"

Colleagues say Polk, 68, held himself to those same high standards as he has helped build a nationally renowned surgery department.

He has written or co-written hundreds of papers and journal articles, dozens of textbook chapters and numerous books, and served as editor-in-chief of the American Journal of Surgery for 18 years.

He pioneered the practice of giving antibiotics within an hour of surgery to stave off infection, which has become commonplace.

And McMasters said residents who have risen to Polk's challenge earn his loyalty, and return it. "Most people are pathologically loyal to Dr. Polk. He stands by his people 100 percent. . . . He's made my career. While he was firm and strict as a teacher, he also has a very benevolent and loving side."

LIFE-CHANGING DISCUSSION

Polk attended Millsaps College in his hometown of Jackson, Miss., at the urging of his father. He graduated at the top of his class, and as a favor to a professor, he said, he applied to Harvard Medical School, only to turn down a chance to attend on scholarship because it was too far away. But Harvard sent a premier physiologist to try to

persuade Polk to change his mind—an hourlong discussion that determined the direction of his life.

"He reinforced some of what my father said," Polk said. "He said I ought to go, end of discussion."

Polk hated medical school until he got interested in surgery. As a medical resident in St. Louis and a young doctor and academic in Miami, Polk found mentors to emulate. His reputation grew, and universities began to court him.

In 1971, at 35, he became U of L's surgery chairman, lured by the promise of a department with potential, a growing downtown medical community and a closet attraction to the horse-racing scene.

One early decision was to not renew the contracts of six of the residents who were there at the time, earning him the "Fire-em" nickname—although he said he has let only five more people go since then.

Colleagues who knew him during those early years remember how Polk honed his skills in the aging Louisville General Hospital, a relic of an older era with long hallways, an open ward and few of the technological amenities of today. Polk brought residents on bedside rounds there, firing questions at them and demanding good answers, recalled Dr. Gordon Tobin, a U of L professor and director of the division of plastic and reconstructive surgery.

"He fit right in with the other surgeons I met in that era," Tobin said. "The surgical personality is very straightforward and blunt."

Polk's reputation for demanding excellence was a draw for some, said Dr. J. David Richardson, a professor and vice chairman of U of L's surgery department.

"I don't think people have really come here who are really unaware" how demanding it would be, Richardson said. "It's not a place to come and rest on your laurels and enjoy a quiet kind of life."

Dr. William H. Mitchell, a retired surgeon in Richmond, Ky., was among Polk's early residents. He said Polk expected him and his peers to be on their game at 7 a.m. "whether we were bright-eyed and bushy-tailed or not."

"If you ran out of gas, you'd better get pumped up. You were expected to be cogent, coherent and well thought out," Mitchell said.

But Polk was mindful of tailoring questions to a trainee's level of understanding, Mitchell said, and would be hardest on senior residents. Also, many doctors-in-training saw something beneath the harshness—intelligence, skill and passion for his work.

Mitchell remembers a case presented in a conference in which another resident stabilized the fractured jaw of a motorcycle accident victim without calling for backup, even though he had never seen such a fracture.

"He fried him," Mitchell said of Polk's response. "He said: Don't undertake something you've never done without backup."

"No question about it," Mitchell said, "he made all of us better doctors because he made us think about what we're doing."

FAMILY—AND HORSES

Nurturing residents and building a department required long hours.

"He was busy and gone a lot," said his daughter, Susan Brown, one of two children with his first wife. "My mom kept everything running for us."

That didn't change her love and admiration for him, said Brown, 44. And she said he has taken an active interest in the lives of her three sons, attending sporting events with them and talking medicine with two who have expressed an interest.

Dr. Susan Galandiuk, Polk's 47-year-old second wife, said she understands the long hours and is a workaholic herself. She said Polk routinely gets telephone calls at their East End home from doctors around the country asking for professional and personal advice—and sees this as a compliment, evidence of the relationships he has built over the years.

Some of Polk's rare hours outside of work have been focused on his love of horses. He and Richardson together are owner-breeders whose horses have included Mrs. Revere, a four-time stakes winner at Churchill Downs in the mid-1980s for which a stakes race is named.

Richardson sees things in common between surgery and the horse business, such as the reminders, every time a horse gets hurt, of the fragility of life and success. Polk sees common points, too, but noted: "A good horse is better than a good resident. You love them, and they try hard to be the best they can be."

Polk claims to have mellowed over the years, and links it to his divorce, his remarriage, and the death of Mrs. Revere, whose memory still chokes him up.

He said he also gained new perspective through four major operations, including one for prostate cancer. And he has had to adjust to changing times in medicine; he has been sued for medical malpractice, usually in an administrative capacity, and has had to work within new national rules limiting residents' working hours to 80 a week.

But current trainees and friends haven't noticed a mellowing. Cornelia Poston, a third-year medical student, prepares diligently for rounds by writing questions on note cards, studying the night before and carrying a book called "Pocket Surgery" inside her white coat.

You strive for perfection, and he demands that," said Dr. Bryce Schuster, chief administrative resident. "At times it could be intimidating. But fear is a great motivator."

Mitchell agreed. "The residents still get sweaty palms," he said, "but they still stand and deliver and give a straight answer to a straight question."

To celebrate Polk's career, colleagues, residents and others have launched a \$5 million campaign to rename the department in his honor and secure an endowment for clinical, education and research activities.

But his true legacy, colleagues say, may be best symbolized by a picture of a tree in his office, with names of the surgeons he has trained near the many branches.●

MESSAGES FROM THE PRESIDENT

Messages from the President of the United States were communicated to the Senate by Ms. Evans, one of his secretaries.

EXECUTIVE MESSAGES REFERRED

As in executive session the Presiding Officer laid before the Senate messages from the President of the United States submitting sundry nominations which were referred to the appropriate committees.

(The nominations received today are printed at the end of the Senate proceedings.)

MESSAGE FROM THE HOUSE

At 2:59 p.m., a message from the House of Representatives, delivered by