

Family and colleagues mourn loss of surgeon

Father of four will be remembered for his talent, leadership and joy in living

By Ken Knutson

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The legacy of Christopher Getch, neurosurgeon, professor and Hinsdale resident, is a rich and multi-faceted one, according to those who knew him well.

His wife, Dr. Gale England, said his zest for life was her favorite quality.

"He was a happy guy. He always found the positive in everything," she said, noting his penchant for cheerful whistling.

Dr. Getch, professor of neurosurgery at Northwestern University, passed away unexpectedly Jan. 9 at the age of 50, leaving behind his wife and four sons.

Colleagues of Getch say he was a wonderful doctor and educator along with being a terrific friend.

Dr. Hunt Batjer said Getch was his first recruit after becoming chairman of the department of neurosurgery at Northwestern's Feinberg School of Medicine in 1996.

He remembers sitting at O'Hare Airport when a colleague called to let him know that Getch was available after an expected position in Philadelphia fell through.

"He said, 'Look, we've got your guy,'" Batjer related. "It was good chemistry from the start."

Batjer said Getch was extremely meticulous and skilled as a surgeon. But he was also struck by his consideration for fellow staff, as exemplified one night a patient came in when Batjer was on call.

"(Getch) called my cell-phone. 'HB, are you driving?"

Just turn around and go home. I've got it," he said. "That was classic Christopher Getch. A team player."

Getch was instrumental in setting up a surgical services partnership between Northwestern and Edwards Hospital, and Batjer said he was very thorough in his analysis.

"I think he was incredibly bright and insightful. What I really enjoyed about him was he was always the contrarian so that we all were better informed about issues," he said

Getch was the immediate past president of the Congress of Neurological Surgeons, serving from 2010 to 2011.

Current president Christopher Wolfla said he and Getch, who he's known since 2000, were appointed to the CNS board of directors the same day in 2000. He said his colleague deftly led the international organization through a significant season of expansion.

"He brought a profound sense of vision and leadership," Wolfla said. "We transitioned from being an office of five people to an office of more than 230. He was a star in that respect, and he was a good friend."

Wolfla said Getch worked tirelessly for his patients and the profession but never let stress dampen his mood.

"What I will remember most is his smile and his ability to make things fun even during challenging times," he said.

Getch, a Boston native, also served as president of the Illinois State Neurosur-



Gale England said her late husband, neurosurgeon Christopher Getch, had the gift of gab. "He would often come home from a trip and know everything about his seat-

mate, and no matter what topic of conversation we ended up on, he would know something about that." (photo courtesy of Gale England)

gical Society and enjoyed conducting clinical research to advance the field of neurosurgery.

Batjer said Getch uniquely blended a relentless drive with an infectious joy.

"It's a big hole to fill," Batjer said

England said that joy was ever present at home, as well.

"What a wonderful father he was," she said.

They loved to travel as a family, she said, laughing as she remembered one of the many adventures they had.

"We ended up lost on a volcano once in Hawaii," England recounted.

She cherished the way he could see the big picture

while not losing sight of the details.

"He was very observant of the world around him and appreciative of all the little things," she said.

Having coffee together before the boys would wake was special, and she said he loved playing Legos and trains with their 3-year-old son.

England said one of his greatest loves was their vacation place in Ontario, Canada.

"He would turn into Daniel Boone, lumberjack guy. He would move boulders and chop down trees," she said.

Last year after the big snowstorm, he went around

chopping up fallen tree branches for neighbors to use as firewood.

"The amount of support that we've had from the community has been absolutely amazing. I don't think we could even begin to get through this without all their support," she said.

Beside pictures of Getch receive a "good night" before sleep and morning greetings. England said she's writing a journal of memories for their 3-year-old and 9-month-old boys and plans to create a picture book, as well.

"I was extremely proud of him, and I'm so glad I told him that often," she said.

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