



In Memoriam

“It is amazing what you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit” – A Tribute to Mark Bellinger

“It is amazing what you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit.” (Harry S. Truman)

Estimating the impact one man has had in life is difficult, if not impossible, for the fruits of their labor may not be immediately apparent, especially when that man didn’t seek the credit he was due. Despite his reticence toward praise, Mark Bellinger’s accomplishments were evident (see [Figs. 1 and 2](#)).

Mark passed away in February of this year, much sooner than any of us would have expected. He was not only my partner for over 15 years, he also introduced me to pediatric urology as a resident at Pitt and had a strong influence in my life and the direction it would ultimately take. I remain proud and extraordinarily lucky to have been Mark’s partner and friend, and now contemplating his life see that his singular quality was that he was a selfless mentor for those fortunate to have known him.

Born 20 April 1948, Mark grew up in Syracuse New York. He attended Christian Brother’s Academy, LeMoyne College and then medical school at SUNY Upstate Medical University. After his urology residency at Medical College of Virginia, Mark went on to Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia as one of John Duckett’s first fellows. When asked his reason for pursuing a career in pediatric urology, I was disappointed. I assumed it was because he had discovered his vocation. Instead, he said he had not had a great deal of exposure to pediatric urology during residency and “wanted to see more.” Mark became a protégée of John Duckett who inspired him throughout his career. Mark later referred to John as “My father, who art in Philadelphia.” Several years after fellowship he “went to see more” and spent 2.5 months at Great Ormond Street in London, his vocation now well established.

Prior to landing at Pitt, Mark went from fellowship and London to Hersey Medical Center. While there, amongst other academic pursuits, he performed fetal sheep surgical research. I was surprised to learn that years later from Craig Peters when I did the same during my fellowship. Mark was recruited to

Pitt by Hank Bahnson and Tom Hakala in 1985. He was the first and then only pediatric urologist in Pittsburgh for the next 10 years. He loved his work, and somehow managed through natural talent, remarkable efficiency and organization to care for the sheer volume of children with urologic conditions in Western Pennsylvania and bordering communities in 3 States.

But it was not only children that benefitted from Mark’s move to Pittsburgh. So did pediatricians. *Friends on Letterhead*, written in remembrance and gratitude after Mark’s death, Dr. Anthony Kovatch, a local pediatrician and contemporary, characterized his relationship with him as “exclusively via correspondences regarding the patients I referred to him for expert management of their urologic problems... Essentially we were “pen pals” whose communications took place on letterhead.” He went to write that parents said it best: “Dr Bellinger straightened out the bend in his penis and now he can finally pee straight into the toilet,” might a mother or father remark with tears of gratitude, “and he was so kind to me and my son.” After I joined Mark in practice, I was reminded daily that I was the benefactor of his outstanding reputation.

Throughout his career, Mark had significant impact on resident education and won many consecutive resident teaching awards. I was aware of Mark’s prolific and earnest reputation academically, we all were as residents, but many of us were most in awe of what we observed in the operating room.

Mark was the consummate and prolific surgeon. Fellows filmed him during hypospadias repairs. And it was not only hypospadias surgery, we all wanted to see how Mark would tackle complex reconstructive procedures. He had an efficient elegance in surgery that was not reproducible. Years later it was interesting to observe that during our IVU mission trips to Africa together, the local surgeons felt much the same way we did after only spending a week with him in the OR. They recognized they are watching a master at work.



Fig. 1 Mark making rounds at University Teaching Hospital in Lusaka Zambia.



Fig. 2 Mark in coaching and mentoring mode.

It was not long after he arrived in Pittsburgh that he established a multidisciplinary spina bifida program. I was impressed he knew each child's name and story by heart. His regular *office* patient schedules were huge (he detested the term *clinic*). There he embraced new technology obtaining the first Macintosh computer any of us had ever seen to fastidiously compile patient databases. He acquired and taught us in-office ultrasound (which was the size of a refrigerator) decades before it became commonplace.

Above all he was steadfastly dedicated to his patients and the field of pediatric urology. His friendly and unassuming manner betrayed his confident self-determination, quick wit and intelligence. Whether it was day or night, every urologic case in the OR, consult or ER visit, he was involved, passing his wisdom along to the next generation of students and residents. And not surprisingly, he took call every night. He rounded before daybreak, well before the residents got there. He forewent summer vacations and

sacrificed many holidays. Because of his example, and despite these perceived hardships, most residents strongly considered pursuing pediatrics by the example he set. He was their mentor too.

And it was during all of this that he decided to start another career.

By mid-career Mark was admired for many things, but not as a crew coach. With no experience but encouraged by his youngest daughter Katie, she convinced him to start a rowing team at Fox Chapel High School because "it looked fun." That's all it took for Mark to embark on what would be a 25-year passion he had for the rest of his life. Today, the Fox Chapel crew team is considered a very highly respected interscholastic program. Mark again saw his place in the service to others. The kids he coached recognized his selflessness and that their coach didn't need acclaim or attention. That is how humble people behave. He coached, was president of the board, mentored student-athletes and was a tireless fund-raiser. Even after his daughter graduated, he continued to work with kids. "They kids are the heart of me" he often said of the team. Those kids he coached and loved, many alumni, crew teammates past and present, dressed in their team rowing jackets and filled the church during his funeral mass.

Mark is survived by Cathy, his wife of 52 years, and his 4 children and 6 grandkids. What saddens us is that he had more to do; more kids to coach, more coaches to teach, more fathering and grandfathering to do. And now he will be missed at crew races and the boat house, birthdays and holidays, graduations and weddings, and casual family events we too often took for granted. He had retired from Children's in 2011 after 30 years of practice healing sick children, making no formal announcement other than marking our OR scheduler's calendar the last day he would do surgery. And that was it. He took no credit for what he had built or accomplished over all those years. That's no surprise.

Sometime after he retired, I discovered in our office all but the last few months of Mark's carefully organized documentation of the children operated on. Written out carefully by hand in notebooks, the secretaries and I sat and counted how many cases he did since he started here at Pitt in 1985 – over 13,000. He left practice content he had finished the race and kept the faith. I know he was fulfilled and happy with his life after medicine. For many of us though, we missed our friend and mentor. Mentors are hard to find these days, maybe because we don't appreciate them, or seek them out. That is an obituary I will write another day.

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