



# Obituary

## Obituary: A Remembrance of Henry Phil Gross MD (1930–2014)

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While continuing the work of the late Professor Sir John Charnley at Wrightington Hospital, I received an invitation from H. Phil Gross MD to deliver the Association of Bone and Joint Surgeons® (ABJS®) Presidential Lecture. Although he was President of the ABJS® at the time, I did not know Phil. Even so, Phil and his wife, Jo

were gracious enough to invite my wife Marie and me to their home in Sioux Falls, SD, USA. I was eager to meet the man generous enough to think of me for such an honor. Phil and his wife were so kind and generous to both Marie and I. Our friendship truly blossomed in subsequent get-togethers at various ABJS® meetings. In between the meetings and the gatherings, there was regular correspondence with photographs, details of events, and gifts—Phil’s woodworking—which my wife and I still treasure.

Always interested in medical progress, Phil was an early advocate of the total hip replacement, performing his first total hip replacement in 1970 [6]. Although known as a pioneer of surgical innovation, Phil was a selfless caretaker who wrote extensively on character [4], ethics [1], and the patient-doctor relationship in medicine [2]. He believed it frequently was the operation he did not perform that often served a patient best [5]. Phil knew from early on how a compassionate and empathic physician could influence the life of a patient. At 30-years-old, and finalizing his orthopaedic training, Phil was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis [3].

“A wise neurologist advised me not to abandon my dreams but rather to

work with my hands and enjoy life as long as possible,” Phil wrote in *Woodworker’s Journal* in 2011. “For 30 years, I practiced general orthopedics with a specialty in hip and knee joint replacements” [3].

In 1981, perhaps inspired by his own personal history, Phil took a 6-month sabbatical from his practice in South Dakota, and brought his family to Kathmandu, Nepal, where he volunteered at a mission hospital. There, he met orthopaedic surgeon Ashok K Banskota MD.

“My working environment was so austere at that time that it would not be incorrect to say that I literally worked out of a trunk of old, and often used, orthopaedic materials,” Dr. Banskota wrote in an email to *CORR*®. “Phil joined me and we had the most memorable and challenging conditions to face in providing care to the patients attending this charity hospital.”

Dr. Banskota recalled Phil giving his heart and soul to the work, adapting to the conditions of the sparsely equipped hospital.

“I remember Phil and me operating on a young patient with paraplegia with a lesion of the third lumbar vertebra,” Dr. Banskota wrote in an email. “It turned out to be an aneurysmal bone cyst, it bled like fury,

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but we managed to decompress the cyst and graft it, and the patient fully recovered.”

Under these harsh conditions, Phil and Dr. Banskota bonded, developing a mutual respect that turned into a true friendship. According to Dr. Banskota, Phil was impressed by the simple way the people farmed in Nepal, using only basic tools to dig and “beat” the soil. He was so impressed in fact, that Phil actually brought several of these tools back to the United States to show his farmer friends in Sioux Falls.

The bond thrived even after Phil’s sabbatical ended. They lived on opposite ends of the globe, but when Dr. Banskota’s work brought him to the United States, he always visited Phil in his home in Sioux Falls.

“I became very close with his entire family, even though we met very infrequently,” Dr. Banskota wrote. “When we did meet, it was as if we had always been together.”

When Phil retired from practice, his work did not end. In 1989, he received a Bush Medical Fellowship to study clinical research in a community hospital setting. The work took him to the University of California at Berkeley where he devoted much of his time to medical ethics. He also served on the National Board of Ethics of the American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons and was even an inductee into the South Dakota Hall of Fame

[5]. Through all his achievements, Phil had the unfailing support of Jo, his wife of 60 years (Fig. 1).

During retirement, Phil pursued his other passions: Community outreach work and woodworking. Phil and Jo

helped found The Banquet, an outreach program serving the poor and disadvantaged in Sioux Falls. Phil also carved sculptures by hand, and gave his work as gifts to friends and family (Fig. 2). Through the years, Phil



**Fig. 1** Phil always had the unfailing support of Jo, his wife of 60 years. Reprinted with permission from B. Michael Wroblewski MBChB, FRCS.

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**Fig. 2** Phil's work station included two standard workbenches, a table saw, band saw, scroll saw, router table, drill press, and two lathes. He enjoyed working with the lathe in his workshop. Reprinted with permission from *Woodworker's Journal*, 2011.

collected a wide variety of tools for his woodworking station including two standard workbenches, a table saw, band saw, scroll saw, router table, drill press, and two lathes.

"My workshop is my refuge," Phil wrote in 2011. "Not many activities I am able to do are as available or afford

as favorable an outcome. Fearful of losing my creative energy, I am not tempted to enter the production mode. There are people who do this well, but I realize my limits. By giving away most of my finished pieces, I continue to enjoy the craft and reap immeasurable satisfaction" [3].

Phil is survived by his wife Jo, his three children Martha, Cort (Mary Ann), and Robert (Caroline), six grandchildren, Margaret, Eli, Sophia, Emily, Athena, and Gloria. He is also survived by his sister Yvonne, brother-in-law Harvey Schmidt, sister-in-law Kate Gross, and foster-brother Fred Rittershaus (Ardene).

## References

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