In Memoriam: Cornelius E. McCole, MD (1924-2008)

On June 19, 2008, Cornelius E. McCole passed away surrounded by devoted friends in Pontiac, Michigan. He was 83 years young. Con was born in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, which he proudly referred to as “the region,” on October 16, 1924. His father, mayor of Wilkes-Barre, was also named Cornelius. As a baby, he was repeatedly tossed in the air and caught by George Herman “Babe” Ruth, when the Babe visited the McCole home.

He attended the Wyoming Seminary, Princeton College, and the University of Pennsylvania Medical School, followed by an internship at the Geissenger Clinic. In 1951, he started his residency under Alan Woods, MD, at the Wilmer Eye Institute. He finished in 1956 after A. Edward Maumenee, MD, had assumed the professorship. His residency was interrupted by 2 years of army service. During residency, he was particularly close with Frank B. Walsh, MD, and Jonas Friedenwald, MD. On graduation, he joined Jack Guyton, MD, who had left the Wilmer Eye Institute in 1954 to become chair of Ophthalmology at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit, Michigan.

A humanist and great raconteur with a gregarious personality, he made friends easily, everywhere and instantly, from janitors to captains of industry and from reformed gangsters to religious leaders. The consummate physician, he inspired the patient’s confidence with manifest medical skill, a genuine interest in his fellow man, and a winning personality.

On Guyton’s retirement in 1976, McCole succeeded him, greatly expanding the department. From the start, Con was active in the development of young people in the Detroit area. Friends, patients, and peers would funnel their children to Con, who had a special ability to communicate with and inspire the young, even during the turbulent sixties and seventies. He was active in scouting and would anonymously pay for the education of those who could not afford it. He saw the best in all around him, particularly the young, inspiring them to be their best. He knew by name virtually every employee at his beloved Henry Ford Hospital and treated each with dignity and respect. Leading by example, positive reinforcement, and an infectious, overwhelming joy for life, he was a combination Yoda and Auntie Mame. Though he had no children of his own, he was godfather to more than Don Corleone.

From his arrival in Detroit, he took virtually every meal out except when he was the honored guest at a friend’s home. He frequently took students, residents, and coworkers to dinner where he would fill their bellies and empty their minds of the day’s work while discussing humor, history, philosophy, unified field theory, and our voyage out into the Milky Way.

Correspondence: Dr Odel (odel1@aol.com).

Jeffrey G. Odel, MD