Daniel H. Labby, MD (1914-2015): A Tribute

To describe Daniel Labby as a man of insatiable curiosity and boundless spirit barely does justice to the particular brand of intelligence, wisdom and grace that he so lovingly brought to his role as one of the Ethics Center’s founders.

Although still actively teaching, he had been officially “retired” for four years when he became one of the Center’s founding forces in 1989. Ethics was hardly a new interest for him. Trained as both internist and psychiatrist, with a distinguished record of accomplishment that took him to the east coast and Europe and included many years of practice and teaching at OHSU, he had an extraordinary range of expertise. Diabetes, liver disease, syphilis and human sexuality (he pioneered education on this subject in Portland’s high schools and colleges) were but a few of his areas of study and practice, and each added to his uniquely broad view of medicine while fueling his growing interest in ethical issues.

Ethics was what Dan described as “a topic that is life’s blood for me.” He was deeply troubled by what he described as “the ruthlessness of the medical profession,” where “the patient too often took second place to the egos of the doctors.” And he quickly saw how what he described as “the enormous seduction of technology” could undermine the equally enormous responsibility health care professionals have to the care and well-being of their patients.

One of the primary roles he would take on in building the Center’s programs grew from his thinking about his own retirement. He wondered “what happens to all that stuff you have in your head when you retire?” He began to reflect more generally on the untapped wisdom of his many distinguished colleagues who had left the profession. And so was born the Dr. Daniel Labby Senior Clinicians Seminar Series, one of the Center’s longest-standing programs.

Now, more than two and a half decades and fifty-two seminars later, the series has roamed the medical landscape far and wide, touching on countless ethical issues. Over the years the series has brought a wealth of wisdom and experience to the larger ethical debate, and has sown numerous seeds for curriculum change and policy development.

Dan, not surprisingly, was characteristically modest about his program’s success. His disarming humility was after all one of his most endearing traits. Happiest of all in his garden, or listening to music in the company of his beloved wife Margaret, he was the master of the one-liner, beguiling with irresistible charm as he deflected any compliment directed his way. Always, he brought wisdom, generosity of spirit and impish humor to the world – a world about which he never lost his curiosity and wonder.

Simply put, Dan Labby was a most gifted, wise and gentle teacher to us all.

-Amanda Ashley