Introducing George L. Spaeth, the 2010 Recipient of the Weisenfeld Award

It is a great pleasure and honor, as well as a somewhat daunting task, to introduce the 2010 ARVO Weisenfeld Award recipient—daunting in that George L. Spaeth, MD, manages somehow to be not one but many men, much as a Hindu god comprises many entities or avatars.

First among these avatars is George Spaeth, the quintessential Philadelphian. Steeped in the Quaker culture of collegiality and independence, generations of Spaeths have flourished in this urbane and cultured city of tolerance.

George is also the quintessential student and scholar. He is a graduate of Germantown Friends School, received his baccalaureate degree from Yale College where he graduated Magna Cum Laude in history and Phi Beta Kappa, and then went on to Harvard Medical School whence he graduated Cum Laude and was elected to Alpha Omega Alpha. His many intellectual interests, formidable curiosity, and prodigious command of a vast treasury of subject matter are legendary.

George is an ophthalmologist par excellence. After his internship at the University of Michigan, he came to the Wills Eye Hospital in 1961, where he served as Resident and Chief Resident. He then went into the U.S. Public Health Service and became a Clinical Associate at the National Institute of Neurologic Diseases and Blindness, rising to the rank of Lieutenant Commander. He came back to Wills to practice, and the rest is history: A glaucoma consultation with him remains the ne plus ultra.

George is the consummate family man. His enduring partnership with Ann has produced a wonderful home and magical circle in which three marvelous children have grown whose intellectual abilities, social commitment, drive for personal excellence, and charm rival their parents.

George Spaeth is surely among the very top clinical glaucoma specialists in the world. In 1965 he went into practice with his father Edmond B. Spaeth, MD. In 1968 he assumed directorship of the Glaucoma Service at the Wills Eye Hospital. He has held the Lewis J. Esposito Glaucoma Research Professorship since 2000 and is a Professor of Ophthalmology at Jefferson Medical College at Thomas Jefferson University. He is the author of many hundreds of papers in the peer-reviewed literature, has written scores of book chapters, and has edited 21 books.

He is the consummate contributor, both in the medical field and in the world at large. In addition to positions of leadership at every professional level from the Philadelphia County Medical Society and Pennsylvania Academy of Ophthalmology to the American Academy of Ophthalmology and the American Ophthalmological Society, he has numerous awards bespeaking the breadth of his social commitment: his Chestnut Hill College Award for meritorious service to the community, his Silver Tray Award, given to an alumnus who has made outstanding contributions to Wills Eye, his Class of ’54 Meritorious Service to Yale Award, his Golden Apple Award from the Wills residents, his Bausch & Lomb Visionaries Award, and his Herbert Newberg Peace Award. He has truly given generously of himself at every level of his personal and professional lives.

George is an international leader. This has been recognized with a Medal of Achievement and the Sir Stuart Duke Elder Award from the International Glaucoma Congress, as well as prizes, named lectureships, and awards spanning the globe from Greece, to Poland, to Japan, and beyond.

He is a scientist. Early on in his career, working with G. Winston Barber, he published a landmark paper that contained the first report of the clinical findings of homocystinuria, including platelet aggregation abnormalities, a specific screening test, and the incidence of the disease in the United States, as well as the effect of pyridoxine therapy on the disorder. He has since gone on to publish cutting-edge clinical papers in virtually every area of glaucoma, including the characterization and natural history of the cardinal manifestations of glaucoma, the importance of the medical history, the anterior chamber angle, visual field, optic nerve, staging systems, and more recently, quality of life and ethical principles.

George loves life. Scrolling through the catalog of celebrations in Philadelphia and particularly at the Wills Eye Institute, his impish grin, surrounded by legions of admirers is ubiquitous. He is someone, to paraphrase Tennyson, who has truly drunk life to the lees.

From sailing at Squirrel Island to cadging the services of the top tennis ringers in the first-year resident group so as to perennially win the Philadelphia Cricket Club member-guest tournament, to piloting his sporty convertible, top down, in all weather, George is a true sportsman.

George Spaeth, teacher, has been a pillar of the Wills Eye residency and fellowship training since his first day on the staff. He is a mentor and educator without peer. Outside the Glaucoma Service, a large map of the world carries color coded pins marking his trainees over the years. Every continent is dotted with chairs of departments, presidents of glaucoma societies, and famed practitioners who constitute the Spaeth diaspora.

He is also a gadfly. Always willing to ask the difficult questions, always interested in turning conventional wisdom on its head, always pushing back limits of received knowledge and never fearing to say that the emperor has no clothes, he is an irreplaceable asset to an academic institution. It is with tongue-in-cheek recognition of his impact on some of his unsuspecting trainees that the residents have dubbed his fellows “The Spaeth Cadets.”

If I had to pick an author who best expressed the Spaeth philosophy of life, it might be George Bernard Shaw when he said, “Life is no brief candle to me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.”

We at the Wills Eye Institute are so grateful that it has been among us that this torch has burned so brightly for so long. The key avatar for us on Walnut Street in Philadelphia is George L. Spaeth, MD: consummate Wills man.

Julia Haller