

Members of the Department of Pediatrics:

I write to convey the sad news that Art Ablin died at home earlier this week. Art was one of the giants who played a key role in laying the foundation for the great Department of Pediatrics we are today. Art is a “Michigan Man” who migrated west to open a pediatric practice in Marin in the 1950s. He and his colleagues Seymour Zoger and Joe Kushner developed a clinical oncology program for pediatric patients at UCSF. With Bill Mentzer and Peter Dallman on the hematology side, this ultimately grew into the Division of Hematology/Oncology that we know today. I first met Art in the 1980s and share a few of my thoughts about him here.

Art was, first and foremost, an exceptional physician who cared deeply about his patients and their families. He epitomized kindness and decency and it came naturally to him (they didn’t teach “physicianship” back then). Pediatric oncology was a grim business 60 years ago. The best treatments we had were surgery for the few patients who had resectable tumors. Leukemia was a death sentence. It was perhaps this early formative experience of supporting families through one tragic death after another that shaped Art’s long-lasting interest in palliative care.

Art was a highly accomplished clinical investigator. He helped organize the Children’s Cancer Study Group (CCSG; now COG) and contributed to many of the remarkable advances in our field from the 1960s through the 1990s. He was one of the first investigators to appreciate and grapple with the adverse late health effects of chemotherapy and radiation and organized our UCSF survivor program. He introduced many of us to CCSG and through these efforts helped launch multiple investigative careers in pediatric oncology. I got to be Art’s roommate at a couple of CCSG meetings and the guy could really snore, even back then.

Art was an innovative mentor and educator. He pretty much invented bedside rounds in the 1980s and conducted them with a genial gravitas that inspired generations of residents and fellows. Though he would say “call me Art”, Paul Brakeman, Karen Sun, Dan West and many others who trained here continued to address him as “Dr. Ablin” even after they were faculty leaders with kids and mortgages. It just felt right. Art also had some unusual ideas about names - Kate “Matthay” and “Mignon” Loh aren’t hard once you hear them a couple of times, but Art had his own distinctive way of pronouncing both of them that never changed over the years.

Art was remarkably generous and this left a lasting impact on our department and UCSF. I hold the Roma and Marvin Auerback Distinguished Professorship, which was endowed by a gift from Art’s great friend and colleague Marvin Auerback and his wife Roma. Art and his wife recently doubled down and endowed the Ablin Professorship, which Mignon holds. He established a relationship with Paul Ruby and Alan Neys of the Campini Foundation that has supported training our fellows and advancing the careers of junior faculty for over two decades. The Foundation also contributed to the Mildred Mildred Strouss Translational Oncology Chair that Kate Matthay is the first recipient of. While remarkable, these philanthropic achievements are surpassed by Art’s extraordinary contributions to Family House, which has been his great passion. Well into his 80s, he recognized that the move to the new Benioff Children’s Hospital at Mission Bay would be challenging for the families of our patients if there was no place for them to stay near the hospital. In what was a truly Herculean effort, Art somehow galvanized the UCSF administration, city, and community to obtain a parcel of land, obtain all the permits, and build the gleaming new Family House on Third Street. I have no idea how he pulled that off.

Finally, Art loved life. He was a warm person, avid gardener, and accomplished birder. When we would talk about palliative care, he would sometimes tell me that one of his goals was “to pull off a good death”. Sure enough, after a short illness and rapid decline in his health, he opted for hospice care at home. True to his word as always.

He is – and will be - greatly missed.

Kevin

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