

WINCHESTER GOLDEN GRADUATES

Daly Walker

The Walker family moved from tiny Montpelier, Indiana to Winchester in 1941 when my father, Garl Walker, became a partner in the Maynard and Walker Funeral Home. I was one year old, my sister, Sandra, two. We lived in small clapboard house on Carl street during the War then moved to a larger home on South Main Street where the family resided for nearly half a century. My father owned and operated the funeral home, a venerable victorian structure, until his retirement. He also served for many years as chairman of the board of directors of the Randolph County Bank. Mother, Betty, taught English at Lynn High School. Mother and Dad are buried south of town on the grassy Walker plot in Fountain Park Cemetery. Sandra enjoyed a remarkable career as first an English professor and then administrator at Ball State University. Now retired, she lives in Muncie and Colorado with husband, Eric Kelly, who is chairman of the Department of Architecture at Ball State.

My formal education began in the basement of Winchester's Carnegie Library where I attended kindergarten. The first five years of elementary school were at Central on the ground floor of the high school building located at the shady intersection of High and East South streets. In the summer of 1949, between 3rd and 4th grades, a polio epidemic struck Winchester, paralyzing and taking the lives of several of the town's residents. I fell ill with the virus while playing baseball on the diamond at Goodrich Park and spent much of the summer unable to swallow in Ball Memorial hospital in Muncie. A year later, totally recovered from polio, I rode my Schwinn bike to the Francis E Willard School on the west side of town for grades 6 and 7. Back then the eighth grade was combined with the high school, so I spent the next five years studying in that imposing brick structure with its bell tower and giant gymnasium. I graduated as valedictorian of my class in 1958.

While Winchester High School was small and its curriculum limited, it was blessed with a faculty of dedicated teachers and coaches who did much to shape my life as a physician and writer. I studied advanced algebra and geometry in classes taught by Glen Myers and football coach, Warren Hoover. The wonders of physics and chemistry were first revealed to me by Mr. Fox and Mr. Lawrence, two recent college graduates who were vibrant and innovative teachers. The math and science these men taught me laid the foundation for mastering the basic sciences that were required in medical school. The only foreign language offered at the school was Latin taught by Vivian Meyers. Her lively class prepared me well for learning the Latin derivatives that composed the language of medicine. However, of all the teachers I encountered none was more influential than English teacher, Joe Casey. Mr. Casey was a short

eccentric man with a shock of electrified hair who wore wire-rimmed glasses, rumpled suits, and a bow tie. A devout Catholic and scholar of the classics, he worked as a trash hauler in the summer. Demanding but entertaining too, Mr. Casey taught us Shakespeare, Twain, and Hemingway. He instilled in me a love of literature and language that exists today and inspired me to become a writer of literary fiction.

The men who coached me on the playing fields of Winchester were also important in preparing me for what lay ahead. Football coaches Dick Valandingham and Mr. Hoover and basketball coaches Loyd Mitchell and “Porky” Holt were all fine men who taught their players about fair play, team work and sportsmanship, about being prepared to compete and how to win and how lose. But it was Coach Mitchell who was to make the greatest impact on my life.

Sinewy and graying with a whistle around his neck, Mitch was a man of character and beloved by those of us who played ball for him. He had coached the Yellow Jackets to a sectional title our junior year, and with most of his players back, he led us to believe we had a chance to win the regional our senior year, something a Winchester team had never done. In addition to coaching basketball, he coached the golf team of which I was a member. On a gray, liquid spring afternoon in 1957, coach Mitchell was driving four of us in his Buick sedan to a match with the Muncie Central Bearcats. A light rain was falling and the black asphalt on route 32 west of town was shiny and slick. I still can see quite vividly the on-coming car lose control and veer into our lane, hitting us head-on. I pulled Mitch off of the steering wheel. He was limp and unconscious. It was my father in his ambulance who took Mitch to the Randolph County Hospital where he died of a massive chest injury. Dad conducted his funeral in the High School gym that was filled to near capacity with fans become mourners. Things weren’t the same without Mitch. His death shattered our hoop-dreams, and we lost to Parker in the sectional our senior year. It was polio, then Mitch’s demise, that at an early age exposed me to the existential side of being and started me down a long and arduous path that would lead to a life of practicing medicine. I have often wondered if I, as a trauma surgeon, could have saved Mitch. Probably not.

After high school, I attended Ohio Wesleyan University where I was a pre-med and zoology major. Still under the influence of my high school English teachers, I also studied humanities and obtained a minor in English literature.

Following graduation from Ohio Wesleyan, I matriculated to Indiana University School of Medicine in Indianapolis. Internal medicine. Psychiatry. Obstetrics. Every specialty I rotated through as a student intrigued me. But it was my time in the operating room that captured me. It seemed that the surgeons were doing the real work of saving lives. So early in my junior year I decided to specialize in general surgery. After obtaining my MD degree, I stayed at IU Medical Center for a surgical internship. My plan was to continue on there for the next five years as a surgical resident. But it was 1967 and the Vietnam War was raging. The military was desperate for physicians, particularly those with surgical skills, and I was drafted into the army.

After a brief basic training at Fort Sam Houston in Texas, I found myself in a base camp among the rice paddies and sand-bagged bunkers of Vietnam's Mekong Delta. For a year, I served as a battalion surgeon with 9th and 25th Infantry Divisions treating the troop's wound's and illnesses and performing surgery in a combat zone hospital. A good deal of my time was spent in the "Med Cap" program, going to the Vietnamese villages to care for civilians. A recipient of a Bronze Star, I returned to the States with improved trauma surgery skills. But more significantly I was disillusioned and shaken by the carnage I had seen. Because of Vietnam, to this day, I remain a pacifist who believes that war and violence are rarely the solution to anything.

A residency in surgery at the University of Wisconsin followed my military service. Upon completion of my training, I returned to the Hoosier State where, in 1976, I started a solo practice in general surgery in Columbus, Indiana. At the time, I was the only board certified surgeon between Louisville, Kentucky and Indianapolis. During my career, I made numerous missionary trips to Mexico where I performed surgery on Mayan Indians in Merida, a small dusty town in the Yucatan. I also returned to Vietnam on a mission trip where I worked in a provincial hospital in Nha Trang. During the forty years of its existence, my practice, Southern Indiana Inc., grew to one of the largest general and vascular surgical practices in the state. Before my retirement at age 65, I had performed over 20,000 surgical procedures.

It was in mid career when I was in my 40's that I decided I would like to become a serious author and write fiction like the stories Joe Casey exposed me to at WHS. Perhaps it would provide me an opportunity to share my experiences and to explore how I really thought about things. To prepare myself, I studied creative writing in Indiana University's Master of Fine Arts program and with Louisville's acclaimed novelist, Sena Jeter Naslund. Most of the stories I wrote had a medical motif and were set in a Midwestern county seat town like Winchester. One should write about what they know and feel and medicine and small town life were what I knew about and what was in my heart. These stories have appeared in numerous literary publications including *The Sewanee Review*, *The Louisville Review*, *The Southampton Review*, *Catamaran Literary Reader*, and *The Sycamore Review*. My Vietnam themed short story "I Am the Grass" was published in *The Atlantic Monthly*. It was short listed for Best American Short Stories and an O'Henry award and was a finalist for Best Magazine Writing. A collection of my stories, *Surgeon Stories*, was published by Fleur-de-lis Press. *Little Creek*, a memoir I wrote about living an elemental life in a log cabin in Brown County was published a few years ago. Old habits die hard and at age 76, I still am writing fiction and essays as well as teaching a fiction writer's workshop at Dartmouth College near my Vermont summer home.

It has been nearly 60 years since I graduated from Winchester High School and left town to travel the world and lead a life in medicine and to write stories about it. But in spite of the distance from

Winchester that time and place have created, the imprint the town and its schools left on me remains, vivid and indelible. Winchester is not only where I am from but much of who I am.