

## THE REST OF YOUR LIFE

# Broadening Friendships Beyond Medicine

Michael Myers, M.D., often hears physicians say they'd like to expand their circle of friends beyond their colleagues in medicine, but they're not sure how to go about it.

"I hear so many first-person accounts from physicians who say it's really neat to be going out with some people who have nothing to do with medicine at all," said Dr. Myers, a psychiatrist based in Vancouver, B.C., who specializes in physician health. "Then they make statements like, 'I realize there's a whole other world out there' or 'I think my work sometimes gets me too focused on disease and illness, or death or dying, and I forget sometimes that there are other people who are doing fascinating things.'"

In fact, sometimes his psychiatry colleagues make statements such as, "When I'm with my nonmedical, no-psychiatry friends, I realize not everybody's depressed," Dr. Myers said. "They find it refreshing."

"That's not to discount those doctors who live for their career; it means everything to them," said Bruce Flamm, M.D., area research chairman and a practicing ob.gyn. at the Kaiser Permanente Medical Center in Riverside, Calif. "They'd live in the hospital if they could. That's fine, too. But for every one of those, there are probably 100 doctors who wish they could have more time to do other things."

Why care? Because interacting with people who are not doctors helps you realize that life exists outside of medicine, said Dr. Flamm.

If you struggle to expand your circle of friends beyond your medical colleagues, experts interviewed for this column offered the following advice:

► **Get involved in your community.** Seek opportunities with your community center, church, synagogue, Rotary Club, or the school your children attend. James Gill, M.D., serves on his church's council in Wilmington, Del. In this role, he helps set church policy and also lobbies for social issues such as fairness to immigrants and people who struggle to make ends meet.

Such involvement "gives you broader perspective on the world, which almost has to translate into your profession," said Dr. Gill, director of health services research in the department of family and community medicine at Wilmington-based Christiana Care Health System. "You also get that broader perspective by being involved in the Rotary Club, with the soccer team, or whatever. You tend to see people at different places in their lives with different levels of education and social strata, and [different] occupations. That provides you with a richer perspective when you interact with patients."

Becoming involved in the Wilmington community was easy for Dr. Gill because he practices in the same general area where he was raised and where he did his family medicine residency. "The people I spend most of my time with are my extended family and friends from high school," he said. "But I got involved in other things. You're probably not going to make a lot of good friends just by sitting at the bar or passing somebody on the



Dr. Bruce Flamm finds that taking his dogs, Zoe (left) and Hunter (right), to a dog park is a good way to socialize.

end up meeting a lot of people from all different walks of life and all different fields, yet you share that common interest," Dr. Flamm said.

Two years ago he joined a local astronomy club. He had dabbled in astronomy in high school, "but not seriously," he said.

The club holds monthly meetings in a local auditorium and monthly star viewing parties in the desert. "Not viewing for Hollywood stars," he quips. He makes every effort to attend the events.

Becoming a collector is another way to meet people, added Dr. Flamm, who is a

longtime collector of calculators. "Most of the people who are into that are engineers who have no interest in medicine at all, but you can meet various people," he said. "When I was actively collecting calculators a few years ago, my wife and I would go to a flea market almost every weekend."

Another enriching experience for Dr. Flamm has been acquiring a springer spaniel puppy named Zoe. He and his wife brought her home after their two 14-year-old dogs passed away last year, and they recently adopted a 3-month-old puppy named Hunter. They occasionally take Zoe and Hunter to dog-friendly parks in their area, "where you meet the nicest people who are always interested in dogs," Dr. Flamm said.

Dr. Horbach noted the danger of living only for medicine is that you become "very one-dimensional. There is difficulty keeping up physician morale because of all the things we're battling in terms of finances, paperwork, and insurance. If you have a chance to branch out and talk with other people, you understand that many industries are going through some of the same challenges that we face in medicine."

Dr. Horbach noted the danger of living only for medicine is that you become "very one-dimensional. There is difficulty keeping up physician morale because of all the things we're battling in terms of finances, paperwork, and insurance. If you have a chance to branch out and talk with other people, you understand that many industries are going through some of the same challenges that we face in medicine."

Dr. Horbach noted the danger of living only for medicine is that you become "very one-dimensional. There is difficulty keeping up physician morale because of all the things we're battling in terms of finances, paperwork, and insurance. If you have a chance to branch out and talk with other people, you understand that many industries are going through some of the same challenges that we face in medicine."

By Doug Brunk, San Diego Bureau

## A Profile in Friendship

In the mid-1990s, Toni Harris, M.D., realized that pressures from her academic medicine post as chief of benign gynecology at the University of California, Davis, Medical Center were taking a personal toll.

"It was going to work at the crack of dawn and coming home after a normal person would eat dinner," she recalled.

She resigned from the post in 1996 and went into private practice, but learned that the demands in that setting were greater than she expected. That segment of her career ended in 2002.

"I got into my 50s and I said, 'Life is now. One has no idea how long one's life will be,'" said Dr. Harris, who is back at the UC medical center part-time and is a partner in a medical device start-up company. "There are things I wanted in my life that weren't there."

One of the goals she set for herself was to pursue friendships.

One of her most cherished, she said, is with a teenager, Chris Benderev, who is the son of a urologist

she worked with in private practice.

"He was 10 when we became friends, and we have actively cultivated that relationship," said Dr. Harris, who does not have her own children. "I'm more than a surrogate aunt, more like a truly good friend to a young person, and a mentor. He goes on vacations with my husband and me, he comes to see us without the rest of his family, and we get to participate in the decision-making process as he's gotten older about what he wants to do in life."

Three years ago when her husband was on duty in Kosovo with the Army Reserve, she and Chris would go to the movies nearly every Friday night. "To have a 14-year-old boy want to go out to the movies with a 55-year-old nonrelative who he considers his friend has been one of the real honors of my life," she said. "This is not some nerdy kid hanging out with some old woman. This is a real cool kid who's a class officer, has a big crowd of friends, and goes to rock concerts. Of course, when he wants to go to a rock concert, he calls me to see if I can go."

## Helpful Reading

Physicians interviewed for this story recommended the following books:

- "Workaholics: The Respectable Addicts" by Barbara Killinger, Ph.D., (Buffalo, N.Y.: Firefly Books, 1997).
- "Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories That Heal" by Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D. (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996).
- "Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ" by Daniel Goleman (New York: Bantam, 1995).
- "First Things First" by Stephen R. Covey (New York: Fireside, 1994).
- "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People" by Stephen R. Covey (New York: Fireside, 1989).