

THE REST OF YOUR LIFE

When Caring for Patients Isn't Enough

Throughout most of his 30-year career as a urologist in Joliet, Ill., Dr. Ernie Tan has donated money to various charities, including an orphanage in his native country, the Philippines. But about 10 years ago, he said he felt a tug to get more involved in hands-on charity work.

"At the very beginning of a physician's career, there is a lot of concentration on building up your assets, developing some financial security, and raising the family when the children are very young," said Dr. Tan, a 60-year-old father of two children aged 17 and 27 years. "Then, after a certain point, you start to think, 'You can't just concentrate everything on yourself or the family.' I think that if we're fortunate, if we're able to provide for ourselves and have some retirement on the side, we need to start looking to see how we can help others."

Four years ago, Dr. Tan approached Joliet-based Big Brothers Big Sisters of Will and Grundy Counties and offered to serve as a role model to a needy youngster. He was matched with Philip Duckworth, an 11-year-old boy, whose father recently had died from pancreatic cancer.

"Philip was having a hard time so his mother asked for some help and we got matched," Dr. Tan recalled. "He [was] an

in fun activities such as playing with the family's four dogs and jumping on the trampoline in their backyard, Philip also learned family structure and how to conduct himself. When he would be a guest at the Tan's for dinner, for example, "I'd tell him 'You do have to behave properly just like I expect from my kids. You do have to follow some courtesy rules. When you're at our house, you're welcome to eat dinner. After you get done eating, you put your plates in the sink just like everybody else.' We treat him like one of our kids. He particularly enjoys getting gifts for Christmas and Chinese New Year."

That sense of family structure included names for all of Dr. Tan's family. Philip was asked to refer to Dr. Tan and his wife, Connie, as "Uncle Ernie" and "Aunt Connie," and to the Tan's son and daughter as "Big Brother" and "Big Sister" (in Oriental terms). "This way he has a name for us that shows respect for elders," explained Dr. Tan, who was named the 2007 Big Brother of the Year by the local organization. "That's the way we normally structure it in Oriental families."

Philip's mom is engaged to be remarried in late 2008, so Dr. Tan is backing off a bit to let the new dad-to-be assume a role of influence. These days, he sees

to not think of this as needing isolated time with the Little Brother or Little Sister," he said. "You don't necessarily have to have a half-day or a whole day of isolated time with him or her."

He described his Big Brother role as "a very good experience. It's always good to feel that you've been able to help somebody else outside of medicine."

An 'Internal Desire' to Help

Dr. Jerry Brewer is the product of humble beginnings, coming from a single-parent home with few amenities in the small city of Vernal, Utah. He said that at a very young age, he noticed that his mom was a very hard worker and service oriented. Dr. Brewer's desire to serve others was formulated during high school, when he helped organize a group of seven friends into a "Cookie Group," which baked cookies and delivered them each Sunday to widows in town.

"We'd take them over to their houses and just sit and talk," recalled Dr. Brewer, who finished his dermatology residency at the Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minn., in June 2008. "That experience was very satisfying, and I became interested in service toward others, especially elderly people. We had such a good experience that I still keep in touch with members of that group."

As an undergraduate at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, he coordinated a group of volunteers who visited patients at a nearby state mental hospital. "Most of those people were elderly, too," he said. "We would go mainly to be a friend to these people who [frequently] didn't have family and were isolated from society. We'd take them to church or to other activities."

He also assisted his university peers as a rape-crisis volunteer, a post that required 40 hours of volunteer training and involved serving as an on-call advocate for rape victims when they presented to the hospital. Dr. Brewer got phone calls at all hours of the night during that stint. "There were a lot of different situations," he said. "In some situations, I had to be ready to diffuse very irate fathers who were ready to go get a shotgun. Sometimes, I spent more time dealing with family members."

The rape victims he helped often presented to the hospital "very depressed. They think it's their fault and most of the time, don't want to pursue charges," said Dr. Brewer, who is beginning a Mohs fellowship this summer. "Some of the good you see is later, after helping victims get plugged into group therapy sessions as well as other services. It also was helpful to talk them through the value of getting all the services offered by the hospital, like the rape-crisis kit, in case they want to



Dr. Jerry Brewer (center), and a success story from his troop, Dewon Haughton, attended a seminar by Dr. Ben Carson (left).

COURTESY DR. JERRY BREWER

press charges at a future date."

During medical school at Wayne State University, Detroit, he volunteered as a mentor to eight underprivileged youth in a Boy Scout program, serving as the committee chair of the troop he helped to form. Dr. Brewer organized and attended camp-outs and organized first-aid merit badge activities as well. The youth in his troop, "were energized at having a purpose," he said. "You could see the benefits start to surface in the way they acted. They also started to influence their friends to behave better. Two of them ended up going to college and are currently active in church. I think it helped at least a few of those kids get on track to having a productive life in society."

Dr. Brewer currently teaches Sunday school at a nearby state prison and, after he completes his Mohs fellowship, he intends to provide dermatologic care to needy people in South America on a volunteer basis. "There's a lot of skin cancer down there and a lot of poor people, too," he said. "I've made three to four trips there in the past few years making a few ties. Once I get established, my hope is to make a few trips per year to South America as a volunteer, rendering service to people who might have worrisome skin cancers and be too poor to pursue medical care."

He described his drive to help others as an "internal desire" to make a difference and to make good choices in life. "Seeing other people's lives change for the better because of my efforts is very satisfying. My motivation is to do my part in making the future a better place for me, my children, and others." ■

By Doug Brunk, San Diego Bureau



Dr. Ernie Tan is seated with his wife, Philip, and Philip's mother, at a Big Brothers Big Sisters bowling fundraiser, which his children also attended (standing, left).

COURTESY DR. ERNIE TAN

only child and was very afraid that something would happen to his mom and did not want to have separation from her, even during weekends. There were times when we would go out together with his mom, just so that he would feel comfortable—especially in the very beginning."

His role as mentor was awkward at first, Dr. Tan said, considering the age gap and the fact that he and Philip saw each other only once a week, usually on Saturdays. But, as time went on, they clicked. "In many ways, he also likes my son a lot," he said. "My son is in his mid-20s and can talk to him about video games and stuff like that. Every weekend, we would go out as a family, and he got to know the way our family ran."

According to Dr. Tan, besides engaging

Philip about once every 3 weeks.

"In some ways, I think I've been a positive influence on Philip," he said. "That makes me feel good. If you can be a positive influence, hopefully, that's something that will carry on for many years to come. It's a little bit of time out for other people, a little bit of inconvenience. But if there's a long-term payoff, it makes it all worthwhile."

He speculated that physicians and other professionals shy away from becoming Big Brothers and Big Sisters, because they perceive that it will require too much time. However, he emphasized that the role can be well managed if the "Little Brother" or "Little Sister" lives close by and can be incorporated into the physician's own family activities. "It's important

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