THE REST OF YOUR LIFE

From Itching to Racing, the Hobbies of Physicians

During his dermatology residency at Duke University, Durham, N.C., in the mid-1970s, Dr. Manny Rothstein received a plastic two-handed back scratcher in the mail as a promotional giveaway from a drug company.

He initially shrugged off the gesture and stored the gadget on a shelf but began to notice that back scratchers come in all shapes and sizes. He became so infatuated by this that he developed an itch to collect them.

"It occurred to me, how many different ways can you make a long stick with a hand on the end? I was just amazed," said Dr. Rothstein, a dermatologist who practices in Fayetteville, N.C. "Every time I turned around, I found another one. It just sort of blossomed."

Today, his collection includes more than 620 back scratchers from 64 countries. He exhibits them in display cases that line the walls of his office. "My wife won't dare let me bring them home," he said. "She is really supportive of my hobby, but she jokingly said that when I die she's going to burn them. I tried to tell her that the Smithsonian is dying to have them, but she doesn't believe me."

The collection includes back scratchers made of ceramic, blown glass, jade, brass, silverware, wood, buffalo ribs (cowboy back scratchers), corn cobs (hillbilly back scratchers), leather, and plastic. Most are mass produced but many are handmade. The largest ones were 3-4 feet long—too big for a display case—and were stolen from his office this summer. They were made from a plaster mold of a bear footprint and a caribou horn served as the handle.

USA Today selected one of the back scratchers as a winner of its "Tackiest Souvenir" contest and Guinness World Records considers Dr. Rothstein's collection as the largest of its kind. In fact, the Guinness World Records 2001 book lists his collection in the Top Ten List of Weirdest New Records.

About once every 2 weeks Dr. Rothstein receives a new back scratcher as a gift from patients who return from vacation. "Patients don't mind getting them for me when they travel because they're inexpensive and they're light," he said. "You can stick them in a suitcase with no problem."

He buys about one per month on eBay and has more than 100 duplicate back scratchers. "Since there's nobody else who collects them, I can't trade with anybody, which is what I'd really like to do," he said.

The Doctor's Museum in Bailey, N.C., has offered to house his collection when Dr. Rothstein retires. But for now, the "fun of the hunt" for new back scratchers continues. "Every time I see one I don't have, I'm amazed," he said. "How many different ways can you do this?"

COURTESY DR. MANNY ROTHSTEIN

Dr. Manny Rothstein has collected over 620 back scratchers from 64 countries.

Connecting Through Magic

As a youngster growing up in Wilkes-Barre, Pa., Dr. Jay Ungar became hooked on magic after a friend's father pulled a nickel out from behind his ear. He then visited the local library and read every book he could find about magic.

"It was so exciting to discover a whole world out there that you just couldn't explain," recalled Dr. Ungar, who is now an internist and geriatrician based in Longmeadow, Mass.

During his internship and residency at Baystate Medical Center in Springfield, Mass., Dr. Ungar rekindled his childhood interest and began taking lessons from professional magicians. "I found that medicine was so high powered and intense that when I came home from work, I needed to decompress, and magic was a wonderful way to do that," he explained.

Over the years, he discovered that magic became a unique way to bond with his patients. He adopted the alter ego of Ragnu (the OK) and began performing magic tricks for his patients at the end of their visits, such as changing dollar bills into fifties, making hankies disappear, and—for smokers trying to kick their habit—transforming packs of cigarettes into packs of chewing gum. "I found that most adults are like kids when they watch magic," he said. "People loosen up; the tension that many feel when they're in the doctor's office seems to evaporate." The real magic, he added, "is not so much in the tricks, but in the connection they create."

He acknowledged that his approach is "a little risky" with new patients because he realizes that medicine is a serious business, and he would never want anyone to feel medically shortchanged. He'll perform a magic trick "when I feel the situation and timing are correct," said Dr. Ungar, author of the book "Bringing Magic to Life" (www.bringingmagictolife.com). "After we've talked about their medical matters I'll ask, 'would you like to see something fun?' Most of the time they do."

Patients often come in and say, "Doc, I'm fine. Can we get to the neat stuff already?"

Dr. Ungar/Ragnu the OK often performs for charities, including the Jimmy Fund, the Children's Miracle Network, and for youngsters and seniors at local hospitals and nursing homes. He also teaches magicians locally and at magic conventions around the country.

In the future, Dr. Ungar hopes to mentor more aspiring magicians and magician/physicians "in this whole conspiracy of fun," he said. He noted that magic and medicine "are meant to accomplish the same goal: making people feel better. What a bonus it is to do it in spades!"

Fascinated by Thoroughbreds

In May of 1963, when Dr. J. David Richardson was a high school senior in Morehead, Ky., a thoroughbred horse named Never Bend, which his uncle had trained, came within a head's length of winning the Kentucky Derby.

"He was a great horse and became a great stallion later," recalled Dr. Richardson, who is now vice chair of the department of surgery at the University of Louisville (Ky.).

After high school, he went on to study pedigrees in medical school at the University of Kentucky, Lexington, and during his residency in San Antonio, Tex., and tried his best to arrange vacation time and medical rotations around race meets at Keeneland in Lexington or Churchill Downs in Louisville. "I remember I did a pathology rotation one year in October so I thought I'd have some free time to go to the Keeneland meet," he said.

Gambling wasn't the primary aspect of thoroughbred racing that attracted him but rather being around the horses, watching them grow and develop, and learning about their behavior from people like his uncle, the late trainer Woody Stephens. Mr. Stephens was elected to the National Museum of Racing and Hall of Fame in 1976 and trained five straight Belmont Stakes winners in the early 1980s.

"Horses come in all stripes, like people," Dr. Richardson said. "Some are smart, some are dumb, and some are more talented than others but—by and large—they're honest animals."

Dr. Richardson's experience as a horse owner and breeder began in the late 1970s, when he joined the surgery faculty at the University of Louisville. He formed a business partnership with senior surgeon Dr. Hiram C. Polk that stands to this day. A filly they bred named Mrs. Revere won 13 races between 1984 and 1986.

"She was one of the best two or three fillies in the country," said Dr. Richardson, who is a general and thoracic surgeon. "I think she won about 10 stakes races and over $500,000. If she won the same races today she'd probably make $2 million. She still holds the record for stakes wins at Churchill Downs."

Today Dr. Richardson owns about 30 thoroughbreds that are boarded at commercial farms. He considers the breeding side of the business "fascinating, to plan matings and see how they go," he said. "I enjoy picking up physical characteristics that you think are going to match, and looking at the stallions. You pick the matings, you name the horses, you watch them grow, you sell them, and you root for the people who bought them." ■

By Doug Brunk, San Diego Bureau