



A Tribute to Anthony (Tony) Searles (11/3/37–2/28/14)



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Known endearingly as “Dr. Tony” to generations of admirers, Anthony (Tony) Searles died in Philadelphia on February 28, 2014, at the age of 76 following a long and valiant struggle.

For nearly four decades, attendings, fellows, residents, students, and patients from the University of Pennsylvania, the region, and the world, entered his iconic domain at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania (HUP) to seek his advice, counsel, and wisdom, and to garner

help in plying his legendary and artistic brand of therapeutic magic.

Tony Searles was an icon, a living legend, not only in the tight circles of Philadelphia Orthopaedics but more widely throughout the region and the nation. His cast room on 2 Silverstein at HUP was not the grandiose corner office of Department Chairman or the sanctified operating suite of the surgical staff, but his signature and legendary headquarters was where he presided in solitary command for nearly four decades, and where the most difficult orthopaedics battles were often won or lost.

Tony’s cast room was much more than an orthopaedic service station where fractures were reduced or gypsum encasements were applied. It was a command center and artist’s studio where decisions on orthopaedic care were made in high-level collaboration and consultation between traditionally trained orthopaedic surgeons and a master craftsman and clinician.

Carl T. Brighton, MD, PhD, former Chairman of Orthopaedic Surgery at Penn (1977-1993) recounted, “During my early days as a junior faculty member, fresh out of the Navy, I remember meeting Tony. He was already working in orthopaedics. I was instantly impressed with his intellect and artistry. It was immediately obvious to me that he was special. He thought deeply about each patient. He was highly intellectual and immensely practical. He asked great questions about therapy, and I could see by the way he handled plaster that he was far better than most of the faculty in this regard. I asked him to

put on all my casts. Soon, he was doing the same for the entire orthopaedics faculty. Tony was very special.”

In an article entitled, “Casting Call,” in *HUPDATE* several decades ago, Rebecca Harmon discussed Searles’s early days. “As a young man, he wanted to be an artist, so he studied sculpture at the Philadelphia College of Art but got drafted for the Korean Conflict.” Searles recalled, “They asked me what I did, and I told them I was a sculptor, so they trained me in facial reconstruction. It was a sobering job making molds for implantation on soldiers who had parts of their faces blown apart by mines or bullets.” Harmon continued, “But, it was a job at which the young draftee was extremely successful. He was so successful that he was conscripted as a surgical assistant and was sent to Northwestern University for formal medical training as a surgical assistant in prosthetic surgery.” Later, Searles worked with several European physicians in both France and Switzerland, and during those days he remembers making his own plaster rolls. Searles recalled, “Large strips of gauze were sprinkled with plaster and dipped in buckets of water, and the water just had to be just the right temperature—not too hot and not too cold—or the plaster would dry too quickly.”

Searles recalled his philosophy, “I have my own theory of medicine. Seventy-five percent of a diagnosis comes from listening to a patient; fifteen percent comes from Xrays; and the remaining ten percent from lab results. If we just treat medical problems, then we are doing assembly-line medicine. But, if we treat the whole individual, by getting to know a little bit more about them other than their medical problems, we are practicing good medicine.”



Searles lived and breathed this philosophy during decades of practice and teaching.

“I would probably give a mother with two preschoolers a fiberglass cast instead of a plaster cast, which takes three days to dry, so she would have immediate mobility if the injury allowed.”

“And you can’t just look at a patient and say, ‘Well, this guy had a fractured bone.’ You have to look at him and say, ‘This guy had a fractured bone, and two months ago, he had a myocardial infarction, so what can you do to keep the cast lightweight so there is no extra stress on his heart?’” Searles said.



Tony at the beginning of his art career

HUP physicians quickly came to depend on Searles’s immense talent and creativity.

Searles laughed when he recalled his greatest creation. “A southern socialite came to HUP because of a broken bone in her upper arm,” he says. “She says she needed a cast which would not interfere with her clothes or her ability to give and attend cocktail parties. So, I made her what I call my

‘Venus de Milo’ cast, which allowed her to wear her off-the-shoulder dresses, and pearls, and stuff.”

Nothing was too difficult for Searles, nor did he ever lack for a challenge. He always had a great smile, a cheerful attitude, and a colorful bow tie, and made the patient comfortable and at ease with engaging stories and anecdotes that could have filled volumes. Tony could talk sports, politics, history, chemistry, horsemanship, motorcycles, meteorology, material sciences, astrophysics, wine tasting, engineering, art, movies, theater, and restaurants, and that was just for starters! Whether it was a university president, a matriculating freshman, or a member of the housekeeping staff who was in his cast room, Tony would focus them on something other than their orthopaedic problem and, in doing so, begin the process of healing and rehabilitation.

A retired nurse whose daughter was treated by Searles recalled, “He was a man who practiced what he preached. My daughter, who had undergone a knee fusion, could not tolerate anesthesia because of a rare infection. So, when it was time to remove six stainless steel pins from the bones of her legs, Tony was called in. Even though I am a nurse, I could not believe what I saw. Tony used Lamaze breathing techniques and his personal knowledge and skills to gently coax my daughter through the discomfiting procedure. While he held her leg,

Tony taught her to breathe and talked her through it. After one pin was out, he gave her a little rest, and then took another out. It took two hours to remove all six pins. Tony was fantastic. I was overwhelmed with the compassion with which he helped my daughter.”



The Black Baron

In addition to the accolades for

his orthopaedic work, Searles was a folk hero and rock star to generations of Penn medical students. In 1997, the senior class of the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine honored Searles at their graduation ceremony with the highest honor that the school could bestow on an allied health professional. Searles received the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine Award for Excellence in Teaching by an Allied Health Professional, an award that was created specifically for him. The award was bestowed upon Searles by William N. Kelley, MD, PhD, Dean of the School of Medicine and by Gail Morrison, MD, Senior Vice Dean for Education.

In the testimonial letters that supported his nomination and award, many former students noted that Tony was singularly responsible for their trajectory into orthopaedics. Many others who did not pursue a career in orthopaedics said that Tony taught them the most practical lesson that they learned in medical school, to listen carefully to patients’ stories and to be a caring and compassionate doctor.

Ellen Passloff, MD (Penn Medicine ’90), a former student of Searles’s and pediatrician now practicing in Seattle, WA, commented, “Because of Tony’s amazing example, I have learned to truly connect with all of my patients, no matter how young they may be. I spend the majority of their appointment time REALLY listening to every detail of their symptoms and concerns. In addition to being a wonderful teacher, Tony was a good friend, an incredible mentor, and an emergency rescuer with his orthotic devices! He cured me of all of the injuries I sustained while training for both the 1988 and 1989 New York City Marathons. He made a special orthotic for my Morton’s neuroma and a great wrist splint to heal the injury I sustained when I fell off my bike on the way back from the Wissahickon Drive, where I had just completed a twenty mile training run. Tony was truly gifted in the art of plaster and fiberglass creations, and he regaled me with amazing stories while performing his magic! His wonderful smile and spirit are permanently engraved in my memory. He was really one of the finest teachers I have ever had. I will miss him dearly.”

Tony clearly enjoyed teaching medical students. For generations, they entered his cast room for the required “Principles and Practice of Splinting and Casting,” but they

left with far more than knowledge of casts and splints. Tony recalled, “When I first started teaching the medical students, I thought the course was boring so I livened it up by including historical information, letting them cast one another, and observing patients.” Those efforts brought handsome dividends in accolades, testimonials, and awards for Searles from generations of medical students and ensured that his legacy would be forever enshrined in the Pantheon of Penn Medicine.

Born in Philadelphia on November 3, 1937, Anthony Searles spent his childhood intrigued by art during a time of war. He loved sculpting and painting. He attended the Philadelphia College of Art before serving in the navy in Korea. During the Vietnam War, he served in the army and later completed his medical corps service at Fort Dix. His early post-military employment was at Atlantic City Hospital and later Graduate Hospital, where he worked with orthopaedic surgeons, Dr. Jesse Nicholson and Dr. James Nixon.

Searles came to the University of Pennsylvania in the mid-1960s, where he worked with Dr. Elliot Stellar in Anatomy before joining the Department of Orthopaedic Surgery, where he prevailed for nearly 40 years. Searles retired from orthopaedics in May 2013, at 75 years of age, only nine months before his untimely death.

Tony was a family man. He is survived by his wife Donna, a brother, two sisters, children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. He was “Pop-pop” to his loved ones. He was not a religious man but was deeply spiritual, and respected all religions and all beliefs.

Tony had a great enthusiasm for horsemanship and for history. He enjoyed being an urban horseman, serving in this important capacity to bring history to youngsters. On weekends, he could be seen riding a horse, dressed in full



Civil War regalia, as a member of the “Buffalo Soldiers,” a reenactment unit that paid homage to the four all-black army units formed by Congress at the end of the Civil War.

Tony enjoyed collecting antique guns, knives, vintage Port, and bow ties. He loved fly-fishing and kayaking, fine restaurants, and motorcycles.

“Tony was as legendary in his neighborhood as he was at work. He was a big part of the community,” said Donna Casagrande, Assistant Director of the Office of Admissions at Penn Medicine, and Tony’s beloved wife and partner for 33 years. “He enjoyed coming home after a long day, walking the dog, and smoking a cigar – every night. Tony loved music, all kinds of music: classical, Motown, dance music, the Blues, jazz, and gospel (in particular the Dixie Hummingbirds). He was my Tony.”

Tony was part African-American, part American-Indian, and just plain American, yet there was nothing plain about him. His life encompassed so much of American culture and American traditions. He was outspoken on politics, a distinguished veteran, and a true patriot.

On hearing news of his passing, accolades and testimonials poured in from the region and the world. “Tony inspired a generation of medical students. He was a great person, unbelievably energetic, talented, charismatic, and enthusiastic, and we will miss him greatly,” one wrote. Another wrote, “He was a great guy. I never saw anything but a smile on his face. I know he put a lot of smiles on a lot of other people’s faces as well.” Yet another wrote, “He helped many patients and young physicians. I have missed him every day he has not been at HUP. We will continue to miss him.” And another wrote, “Tony knew more about orthopaedics than most people, and he always had a treatment plan. Clinic hasn’t been the same since he left.” Still another noted, “Tony was a brilliant clinician and a favorite with the students. He won major teaching awards and was the only person in the universe who could roll plaster without tucks. His loss is a sad day for all of orthopaedics.”

Many noted that it would be a great honor to name the cast room in the new orthopaedic institute after Tony and that there should be a portrait there for future generations of medical students, residents, fellows, attendings, and patients to ab-



Tony standing in front of a portrait of him painted by another artist.



sorb the legacy of this great man. Dr. Scott Levin, Chairman of the Department of Orthopaedic Surgery, wrote, "Consider it done."

A retired professor wrote, "Tony was a unique person with much knowledge, skill, experience, a strong work ethic, and a warm and helpful personality. He certainly will be missed." Another orthopaedic attending wrote, "I was privileged and honored to work

have known him." Another orthopaedic professor and former student of Searles wrote, "Tony was loved by all. His skill and knowledge were unsurpassed. The good old days of long leg casting with windows and wedging, ischial weight bearing, hip spicas, the best Unna boot in the business may be a lost art but live on in the hundreds of trainees he helped educate." A professor of orthopaedic surgery and department chairman at a distinguished university in the Midwest wrote, "Tony is now and was in his time, a legend. We have lost a great man, friend, and teacher."

Tony used every thread in his rich cultural and social loom along with his devoted work ethic, discerning eye, and keen intellect to weave an intricate professional tapestry that was uniquely his own. Tony's widow, Donna, noted, "Tony was the most interesting man in the world. He was like the Dos Equis man, that bearded, debonair gentleman in his 70s, who believed that life should be lived interestingly. Tony was a true Renaissance man. He didn't have a favorite color. Color was his favorite color. He didn't have a favorite movie. Movies were his favorite movie. He didn't have a favorite bow tie. Bow ties were his favorite bow tie. Tony lived a remarkable life, larger than all of us."

with this prince of a man for the past 38 years. He was a wonderful mentor and friend. He will be sadly missed by all of us, by our grateful patients, and by an entire generation of Penn medical students who all knew him, loved him, and deeply respected him as we all did." A professor of orthopaedic surgery, and one of Tony's former students wrote, "I will never forget him. His approach to life and his dedication to the concept of lifelong learning and to his many students and patients were exemplary. We all learned from him. I am honored to

One of my patients who suffered from a rare genetic disease that locked her body in a state of permanent immobility loved to stop in and visit Tony on her appointments at the hospital. She often told me that Tony would always find time to get her a soft pillow or a bendable straw no matter how busy he was, something to make her difficult life easier and more comfortable. "But most of all," she said, "He made me smile and laugh. Dr. Tony was a great man."



Tony's vision of heaven. There, the fish are always biting.