

Alumni Corner

Contributed by Dr. Hugh M. Foy



Dr. Hugh M. Foy

“Robert Schaller, MD passed away December 2014. He was a graduate of the general surgery residency at the University of Washington and a respected pediatric surgeon whose career spanned 4 decades.

I was fortunate to know Rob pretty well. He was one of the kindest, most effective teachers when I rotated on the Children’s service as an R1 and an R4. During my 6 years of training, he

was one of the most masterful surgeons and operative teachers. I remember vividly doing a right upper lobectomy on a 6 year old child with him and it seemed like a breeze, he was such a great teacher. He made you look good and inspired your confidence.

Rob was a world class climber and according to Tom King, Howard Anderson and other fellow residents of his era, for unclear reasons was often whisked away suddenly from clinical rotations to appear weeks later. Understandably it sent wrinkle of dysphoria through the ranks of the busy residents who had to “collapse the zone defense” on short notice on more than one occasion. Later it became known that Rob was under the employ of the CIA, helping install listening devices in the Himalayas. He was a member of the 1st successful ascents of K2, one of the most treacherous peaks in the Himalayas and distant from the well-organized sherpa guide services of Everest. The first “K2” movie in 1991 told the story of Rob and his teams’ heroic efforts. Rob specifically had to stay awake, continually resuscitating a fellow climber suffering from multiple pulmonary emboli who would stop breathing each time he fell asleep. In the movie, the doctor was depicted as a woman in a hut. It was Rob, in a tent. (See the full story published in the Seattle PI in 2007 at <http://www.seattlepi.com/local/article/Spy-Robert-Schaller-s-life-of-secrecy-betrayal-1232285.php>.)

I was rotating as an R4 in December 1981 when Rob returned from the K2 expedition; exhausted, gaunt and 45 pounds lighter. We asked him to “show us your slides?” “I can’t show you the pictures without telling you the story, and I am not physically or emotionally strong enough to now”, he said. But several weeks later, on Thursday after clinic, December 23rd, he took the 6 of us into the conference room, turned down the lights and showed us the slides, and told us of his harrowing adventure. We were the first to see and hear the 1st hand account of the successful ascent of K2.

In the years that followed I was again fortunate to know Rob, as he lived in a home owned by my in-laws. When he and Therese married and had their children, we formed a loose consortium of a baby-sitting co-op. As a result, for several years our children were raised together as somewhat of an extended family. It was a pleasure to get to know them and enjoy their new home in Leschi, which was complete with a 2 story rock fireplace that to little surprise doubled as a climbing wall.

The next 15 years were not too kind to Rob. He suffered from horrible arthritis, diverticulitis and chronic pain. He finally came out publicly about his role as a covert climber in an attempt to get his notes from the CIA (see article above). The last time I saw him he was in a wheel chair with a neck brace. He always wondered if some of his problems were possibly a result of the radioactive power source in the radio transmitter he carried on his back up K2.



Robert Schaller, looks over a copy of “The Ascent of Nanda Devi.” In 1965, Schaller tried to scale the peak to install a listening device that never made it to the top.

Photo credit: Grant M. Haller/Seattle Post-Intelligencer

It was a pleasure to know Rob, to be his resident, colleague and friend. Many children were fortunate to have him as their surgeon. We are all better having touched his life. His dedication, skill and professionalism will always be a gold standard that I will forever aspire to.”

Hugh M. Foy, MD

Director, Surgical Specialties Clinic at
Harborview Medical Center
Professor of Surgery