

Dr. Cheves McC. Smythe's Eulogy of Walter M. Kirkendall, M.D.

**Delivered during the Memorial Service
for Walter Murray Kirkendall, M.D.**

**July 18, 1991
University of Texas Medical School
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In 1971, everything was not a bed of roses at the University of Texas Medical School at Houston.

There was some money in the bank, but there weren't any buildings, and there wasn't any equipment. There was an obsolete hospital that was with a staff in disarray. And, a lot of promise for the future. There were no department chairmen. I think our goal at that time, was to recruit seventeen. And when I hear people talk about recruiting three, or four, or five, I don't get too excited as compared to the job of recruiting seventeen. The strategy that evolved was that without a great deal in the way of resources to lay on the line, you couldn't buy stars, and therefore, the thing to do was to attempt to attract aggressive, younger people whose reputations were on the way up. And, with that strategy, by the time the school developed, one would have people in the right place.

Now, as all internists know, the Department of Medicine is undoubtedly the most important department in any medical school. And, as all internists know, the leadership in that department has a great deal to do with setting the tone of that department, and logically, therefore, the whole medical school.

There were not enough people around then to have formal search committees. There was a sort of an advisory group. And, I'll never forget a meeting about 2:00 or 3:00 o'clock — in an afternoon, it was hot. Of course, it's hot on most afternoons in Houston, so I have no idea what season of the year it was. People whose concerns were featured there, for the future of the medical school largely, were sitting there. They were not all full time faculty members, they were physicians in the community and others. There was an array of people who'd been here to look at the department, some of whom were awfully good, and some of whom have gone on to lead, subsequently, very distinguished careers. And, among the people we'd talked about, the decision came down, well, gee, you know, this is a young institution, it's going to go through some stormy times. We have a group of people in leadership positions whose primary goals have to be their own careers, that's what they're here for. And, maybe if some pepper in this stew is good, more is not necessarily better. And, what this institution needs in this position is a man of balance and experience, wisdom, and forbearance.

And so, we asked Dr. Kirkendall to come. Now, the remarks that have been made yesterday, and so far today, and I think will follow, indicate that we made a pretty good bet, that we got what we asked for, and that that group made a wise decision.

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Now, at this time, I want to skip ahead to something very personal. 1975 - '76 was also not a bed of roses at this institution. And, when I was bounced out of the Dean's Office, I was profoundly hurt, very profoundly hurt, and, I was also puzzled. Since those who were relatively active in my demise had been the people to whom I was closest, I was also alone, and considerably puzzled as to whom to turn.

Now, Dr. Kirkendall himself was under no mean pressure at that same time. And indeed, the forces that were playing on us were pretty much identical. But, Walter is a person who said "Cheves, come to my office every Thursday at 11:00 o'clock." And, he was a person who said "I will help you retrain yourself as a physician." And, he did. And, that episode illustrated this man's extraordinary generosity of spirit more than anything that I've ever seen.

I will be grateful to him for the rest of my life.