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News

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*****UT Southwestern graduate chooses simple life in New Mexico mountains.

ESPAÑOLA, N.M.--Straight and supple like the mountain pine, the man with the axe swings forward. The sun bounces off the snow on the surrounding peaks and twinkles on his solemn wire-frame spectacles. With hands which seem too large for his frame, he efficiently slices the trunk of the piñon into firewood. Later these same hands gently stroke a tiny brown baby, festooned with wires and tubes in a desperate fight to save its life.

The man is Jim Waltner, M.D. The setting is Española, a remote mountain town with a population largely consisting of Spanish-Americans, many at the poverty level. The reasons that brought this brilliant young pediatrician here instead of to a fashionable West Coast suburb or a glittering chrome laboratory in a prestigious Eastern medical school are as complex as the man himself.

James Douglas Waltner, child of the 60's who still wears his ponytail like a badge, president of his graduating medical class and 1972 student commencement speaker, comes from what is often called "good stock." He is the descendant of generations of German/Russian/Swiss Mennonite farmers who had settled in South Dakota. When Waltner arrived at The University of Texas Health Science Center at Dallas and its Southwestern Medical School, he was at first shy and maybe a bit rural.

"I spent my first year running back and forth like a mouse from the campus to my apartment," he recalls. But he also got involved in student activities and was elected secretary of his class. The next three years he served as its president.

Waltner also discovered the symphony and the ballet, and he mobilized fellow students to get into the community and give a hand to young people who were increasingly becoming involved in the drug culture. The medical students manned a youth hotline, helped run a counseling center, lectured on venereal diseases in the schools and developed a manual on street drugs with straight facts.

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It was Waltner's work with troubled teens which made him consider a change of direction in his own career. Leaving a top pediatric residency at the Dallas center, he began a program in child and adolescent psychiatry at the University of Michigan's medical school and headed toward an academic career. "But I began missing the touching...little things like starting the I.V.s, the physical part of being a physician." The young doctor, already in love with New Mexico, returned to pediatrics and completed his residency in Albuquerque. The time in psychiatry was not wasted, however, he says. "I use it every day in dealing with both the parents and the children."

Española, "the place I have found for my home," is a small farming community (population about 17,000) located in a northern valley surrounded by mountains. Perhaps the poorest area of what is generally considered a poor state, its beauty stands in bleak contrast to the plight of its people.

But although Española is poor, its people are proud. Some, lacking money, will barter as in the old days. The father of a child at whose bedside the doctor stayed 65 hours straight, rebuilt Waltner's truck, which he uses to haul firewood from the mountains. Firewood is also a popular barter item--the doctor uses eight cords to heat his adobe farm home each winter. And payments in produce--vegetables and fruit--are often made by farmers. Waltner says that although about 40 percent of his patients are welfare recipients, many want to pay him the difference in what welfare pays on their bills.

What kind of pediatric problems does Waltner see in this small town?

"Just about everything," he replies.

The day starts early. Gladys One Road, on her way to the Santa Fe maternity ward, makes it only as far as the Española Emergency Room. Both an obstetrician and Waltner are summoned in the middle of the night. Fortunately, the baby's suspected problems don't develop.

While he's there, however, Waltner again checks on Dennie, a "preemie" who did have big problems. Not only is Dennie undersized (which means his systems are underdeveloped), he did not breathe for the first seven or eight minutes of his life. Had a pediatrician not been present, he probably wouldn't have made it.

At 7:30 a.m. the doctor is back at the hospital for morning rounds. After checking on Dennie and baby One Road, he stops in to see the older children.

One of these is two-year-old Patricia, whimpering with pain and homesickness. A nurse holds the little girl, hugging her and encouraging her to eat some of her breakfast. Patricia had been playing with a bottle of straight general cleaning solution and spilled some on her leg. The accident wasn't discovered until several hours later when the leg began to turn red. The result: a very bad burn and generalized infection.

Now the office next door is filling with sick children.

Tommy is one of half a dozen with ear infections. Waltner, who believes that an important part of his duties is parent education, takes plenty of time with each case. "It's so important that the parents know why we are doing something a certain way. Then they will follow our instructions." A firm believer in preventive medicine, he also spends time teaching parents how they can head off health problems.

Seth, the son of one of the nurses at the hospital, is checked for a urinary tract infection. Waltner carefully examines the three-year-old while taking a family history from the boy's mother.

Donald, one of the first patients of the day, is a tall, spindly teen-ager. He is one of two known adolescent cases of Wilms' tumor, a cancer of the kidney normally limited to younger children. The pediatrician, who assisted a local urologist in removing the kidney, is working with a hematologist and an oncologist in Albuquerque, continuing chemotherapy weekly.

Sonia was born with the lower part of her backbone missing, a medical condition called lumbosacral displasia. An incredibly beautiful baby with black butterfly lashes, she has survived one crisis. Jim works with the mother, teaching her to empty Sonia's bladder manually, something the baby cannot do for herself. Sonia's life is threatened daily by bladder infection. A life-depriving infection is inevitable, so why are the mother and the doctor working so hard?

"Sometimes you prepare for the inevitable," says Waltner, "by fighting the inevitable."

The pediatrician is constantly on the alert for both tuberculosis and bubonic plague, both health hazards in rural New Mexico. Another regional health problem, and one he sees on a day-to-day basis, is obesity in children, a condition which he attributes to the typical high-carbohydrate bean/tortilla diet of the poor.

Waltner's Anglo patients are often surprised at one of his medical practices. Since coming to Española, he has started prescribing herbal medicines, used in both the Spanish and Indian cultures, for pediatric problems such as colic, diarrhea, gas, coughs and parasites.

"I've learned that there are a lot of things better than a pill. I use such herbs as mint, manzanilla and anise, as well as aloe vera for skin problems. Often you don't have to go to anything stronger."

It is not unusual, he says, for the Spanish, Indian and Anglo cultures to blend in New Mexico, even in the world of medicine. During his residency training in Albuquerque, he first marveled at the intensive-care nurses checking all the monitoring devices on a newborn and then mixing egg and herbal potions to hang over the crib on orders of the family's Indian medicine man. Once he was able to reconcile a family which was feuding over whether to treat a dying child with "white man's medicine" or follow the Indian path. Waltner continued medical treatment, but ordered the "sing" (Indian healing ceremony) himself.

Because of the expanding outreach program at The University of New Mexico Medical School, the physician is again working with young people. As a clinical assistant professor, he has had several medical students come and stay in Española to train with him for a period of time. He also attends staff meetings with the pediatrics faculty on campus in Albuquerque once a month.

"I see myself as a bridge between the academic teaching and the real world of practice. I tell them how I do it in Española and why. I think this is a very important part of the program."

Waltner speaks highly of the New Mexico med school's caring atmosphere, the availability of the faculty to the students and the amount of "real world" medicine the students are exposed to.

He also has the highest of praises for the medical education he attained at Southwestern. "Heinz Eichenwald (chairman of the Department of Pediatrics) did a lot to influence me to expect of myself the highest level of care for my patients," says the doctor today. "In fact, an air of excellence pervades the entire school--I still practice Southwestern medicine."

Waltner's way of getting away from the pressures of patient care, involvement with the parents and training students is to hop into the truck--or onto his bike--and head for home, his retreat from being "Dr. Waltner." Here he becomes Jim Waltner and lives the simple life important to him.

"Dr. Waltner is not who I am--it's a role--and a very important role. But I must be me, too." Being "me" starts on the way home as Jim gazes at the mountains surrounding Española's valley and begins to relax.

Home is a small acreage near the Rio Grande with a view of the Sangre de Cristo and Jemez mountains. The house itself is in three sections, the oldest built about 40 years ago.

In the front is a cactus garden from which Jim and his friends enjoy prickly pear jelly and wine. An orchard with three kinds of apple, apricot, mulberry, plum, pear and cherry trees stretches out behind the house. The noisy fowl live in a nearby pen, there is a large vegetable garden, and a meadow runs down toward the Rio Grande, just beyond the back fence.

Inside, a giant wood-burning cook stove dominates the kitchen. The smell of an omelet, gift from the chickens, bubbling in butter with green chiles permeates the happy room.

Waltner's living room is huge and full of things he loves. At the far end is a massive fireplace with an arm chair and a rocker pulled up in front for toe-toasting.

Along two walls at the other end sit an organ and a piano.

"I think it's obvious," he interrupts the tour with a smile, "that if it hadn't been medicine, it would have been music."

Illuminated by the light of the fire and kerosene lanterns, a giant circular weaving of a mountain scene takes shape. A work of love, he planned the pattern and is doing all the handwork himself. A bedroom, a study and a bath comprise the rest of his retreat.

Even so, the telephone, which is attached to a firebell to give him freedom of the outdoors, can call him at any minute back to the world of Dr. Waltner.

"Sometimes I still have to get away," he says.

Getting away for the pediatrician may be attending a medical seminar. It may be a meeting of the state diabetes association, of which he is president, or it may be a session as medical director for the New Mexico camp for diabetic children. (A pediatrician in a nearby town relieves him one weekend a month.) But when it's strictly for "me," it's more likely to be packing a backpack and heading for his beloved mountains.

"I really believe all this," he says with a sweeping gesture toward the surrounding ranges, "is good for my soul."

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