

Dr. Robert Milch, 78, co-founder of Hospice Buffalo

Harold McNeil
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Dr. Robert A. Milch knew his 63-year-old patient didn't have long to live, but when the man's wife showed Dr. Milch a scrapbook full of her terminally ill husband's poems, Dr. Milch took the time to read them all.

The Amherst surgeon and his patient proceeded to talk at length about the beauty and insight of the dying man's writing, as well as the comfort and solace it brought him.

That incident, from decades ago, helped Dr. Milch learn the difference between curing and caring. In 1978, he became a co-founder of Hospice Buffalo, serving as both its first volunteer medical director and later its first full-time director.

Dr. Milch died Friday in Millard Fillmore Suburban Hospital in Amherst after a brief illness. He was 78.

What became the hospice model that he helped to nurture grew steadily across America starting in the late 1970s.

In 1978, Dr. Milch was a surgeon with Buffalo Medical Group when he was asked to chair an annual conference with the American Cancer Society and Roswell Park Cancer Institute. He opted for something new, a session on



Dr. Milch bet on the conference's success, agreeing that he would cover the expenses if the event failed, but share in the receipts if it succeeded. More than 250 people showed up, and Dr. Milch took the almost \$4,000 windfall, gave it to his Hospice Buffalo co-founder, Charlotte Shedd, and said, "Let's start."

Hospice Buffalo is believed to be the nation's 11th organization of its kind. At first, the local group made do with a small second-floor office near All-High Stadium, and Dr. Milch helped broker a deal with then-Erie County Executive Ed Rutkowski to rent seven unused rooms in the Erie County Home & Infirmary in Alden for \$1 a year. That became Hospice Buffalo's first in-patient unit.

Over the past 43 years, the organization – now Hospice & Palliative Care Buffalo – has grown steadily, having served tens of thousands of Western New York patients and their families. In January 1993 at age 49, Dr. Milch gave up his surgical practice to become Hospice Buffalo's full-time medical director. He even used to make Saturday night house calls accompanied by his wife, Linda, on their way to social events.

A Buffalo native, he was the elder son of Mollie M. Milch, a former Buffalo School Board president, and Dr. Elmer Milch, a former chief of surgery at Buffalo General Hospital. His father may have planted the first seeds of the hospice concept in his son's head, telling him that every good surgeon needed "a sense of humor, a sense of humility and an incision," to understand what it's like to be a patient.

"It's not really ironic," he told loved ones recently about grappling with death. "It's part of our common reality. It's the fine print on our membership card to being human."

Dr. Milch graduated from Bennett High School in 1960, earned his bachelor's degree from the University at Buffalo as an English major in 1964 and graduated four years later from UB Medical School as president of his class.

After finishing his internship and residency in general surgery, Dr. Milch spent two years as a surgeon at the U.S. Naval Hospital in Quantico, Va., before beginning his career as a general and vascular surgeon at Buffalo Medical Group. He also spent more than 25 years as a UB Medical School professor.

Dr. Milch won about 20 awards and honorary degrees in his career. Two of his most cherished were being named Citizen of the Year by The Buffalo News in both 1993 and 1999. His other prized awards included the Hastings Center's first-ever Cunniff-Dixon Physician Lifetime Achievement Award; UB Medical School's Berkson Memorial Award for his compassionate patient care and excellent teaching; and the Medical School's Class of 1981 dedicating its Iris yearbook to him.

Once an English major, always an English major: Dr. Milch enjoyed writing letters to The Buffalo News' Everybody's Column, wrote an op-ed column in the last few weeks supporting state legislation to benefit the dying and also wrote much of his obituary.

Survivors include his wife of 54 years, the former Linda Newman; three daughters, Melissa, Jessica Taylor and Heidi Ann; one son, Michael; eight grandchildren; and his brother, David, a retired television writer for shows such as "Hill Street Blues" and "NYPD Blue."



A memorial service will be held at 1 p.m. Sunday in the Hospice Education Center, 225 Como Park Blvd., Cheektowaga. Masks are required.

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