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that keep the school
healthy and vibrant*



NOBLE INTENTIONS

JOSEPH DICKSON PRIZED SCIENTIFIC ACHIEVEMENT

BY MATT MINCZESKI

Joseph Dickson (MD 1893) used to sit at his desk in his home in suburban Pittsburgh's Mt. Lebanon and labor over calculus and algebraic equations—when he was in his 80s and long retired.

"That's how he was. He was erudite, an intellectual," says Sylvester Stoehr, a family friend.

When Dickson died in 1954, his will and that of his wife, Agnes Fischer Dickson, stipulated that their estates endow a trust to fund the Dickson Prize in Medicine at the University of Pittsburgh and the Dickson Prize in Science at Carnegie Mellon University. Each is awarded annually to a person who has made outstanding research contributions. The first Dickson Prize came with a \$10,000 stipend; today \$50,000 accompanies the bronze medal.

The Dickson Prize is the School of Medicine's highest award, and it often presages other major accolades. Since 1969, 11 Dickson winners have gone on to win Nobel Prizes, including Phillip Sharp, who won the 1990 Dickson for his discovery of split genes.

"It was one of the early recognitions of the importance of that research," says Sharp, who received the Nobel in 1993. "It certainly did elevate me in the eyes of the institute I was a part of, MIT."

"The Dickson is comparatively young contrasted with the Nobel," says the 2006 recipient of both awards, Roger Kornberg, of Stanford University, who was honored for his findings on gene regulation and transcription. "But it's administered by a very fine group of scientists whose professionalism is widely respected, and their choices have been favorably viewed by the scientific community. Over the years, the prize has garnered respect."

Dickson was born in Mansfield Valley, Pa., now Carnegie, in 1868. He graduated from Washington & Jefferson College in Washington, Pa., Mount Union College in Alliance, Ohio, and the Western Pennsylvania Medical College (now the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine). He also trained in surgery at St. Bartholomew's Hospital in London and St. Louis Hospital in Paris. Dickson eventually settled in Pittsburgh and started a practice downtown on the corner of 9th Street and Liberty Avenue. His son and only heir, James Dickson, died of Hodgkin's disease in 1923 at the age of 16.

Stoehr still refers to the Dicksons as "Uncle Joe and Aunt Agnes." They were unrelated, but Stoehr's father was Dickson's good friend. Dickson performed a life-saving emergency surgery on the younger Stoehr, removing his (literally) bursting appendix in 1931, when Stoehr was 11.

"He told me that it cost more to clean up the operating room than it did for the operation," says Stoehr.

Stoehr will always remember Dickson as "the uncle who saved my life." Dickson's generosity has influenced medical science to an extent he may never have imagined. ■



Pittsburgh physician Joseph Dickson and wife Agnes Fischer Dickson "had a vision of progress," the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* declared. Today, their prize presages greatness.

BOOSTER SHOTS

If you're trying to get in touch with **Ron Salvitti** (and if you're not a patient), you may have to wait until 9 p.m. or so. It's a hard-and-fast rule with Salvitti—the workday is for patients. He traces principles like this back to his days as a Pitt ophthalmology resident and chief resident. Mentoring sessions with department chair Dennis Richardson sometimes stretched into the early morning, says Salvitti (Res '73). As a way of thanking the institution where he received his professional training, Salvitti, who practices in Washington, Pa., has established the E. Ronald Salvitti M.D. Chair in Ophthalmology Research.

While members of the Parkinson's disease support group filed out of St. Barnabas Health System's Valencia Woods Nursing Center in Valencia, Pa., **Tony** and **Judy Achkio** talked with the guest speaker, Michael Zigmond, a Pitt professor of neurology. They explained that Tony Achkio was diagnosed with Parkinson's 11 years ago. Zigmond invited them to tour his lab and talked about his research into how exercise increases the brain's protection of the neurons that die during Parkinson's. The Achkios recently gave \$100,000 to support Zigmond's research. —MM

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