Donald Fraley, center, with his son and a train-collecting friend

THE NATURAL
DONALD FRALEY
BY MEGHAN HOLOHAN

As head of the intensive care unit at UPMC Montefiore for 14 years, Donald Fraley, MD '68, encouraged his staff to talk to comatose patients, to avoid dehumanizing the unconscious. On the happy occasions these patients awakened, he made special arrangements to welcome them back. Once, he purchased a bottle of wine for a woman and her husband after she awoke from nine months in a coma. He pulled the curtains shut and instructed the staff to bother the couple only if the life-support buzzers wailed for an hour. Fortunately, the buzzers didn’t interrupt.

When Fraley, a professor in the School of Medicine’s renal division, volunteered for a mentoring program, he was likely to ask for students who needed “extra attention.” “I hope you’re up to the task,” he might tell students charged with helping him mentor their more junior counterparts, at the same time instilling confidence that they were in fact up to the task at hand. All they had to do was look at his record. In one program, Fraley was known to take on 25 mentees at a time.

Fraley, who died November 14 following a struggle with a brain tumor, had a way of taking people under his wing. He invited students to dinner at his home, showing off his Lionel train collection, which twists through tiny villages in his basement. He took them to observe his wife at work (she is a hematologist and oncologist). He met with them one-on-one to help mold their futures.

Zella Zeigler, MD ’68, Fraley’s wife, finds it hard to explain what motivated him to devote himself completely to everything he pursued, “It’s just the way he was; it was a God-given talent. I don’t have it. Not a lot of people do.”

So it’s no surprise to many that the School of Medicine is working with Zeigler to establish a lectureship to honor her husband’s memory. The annual lecture will focus on nephrology, featuring noted experts in the field. The lectureship seems a fitting way to memorialize a great mentor who was also a gifted physician. (His own doctor recalled how one of Fraley’s patients survived what’s normally a fatal condition because of his meticulous care.)

James Johnston, MD ’79, also a professor in Pitt’s renal division, says Fraley always questioned students and trainees, making them think, forcing them to answer. It didn’t matter if students said the wrong thing. He would steer them in the right direction. Further, he was likely to encourage them to take on tasks they might, at first, think they could never accomplish. This was his modus operandi.

As part of a train-collecting group, Fraley partnered with eight men who were writing a collectors’ guide about toy trains. The men began to think the feat impossible, then Fraley swooped in, taking notes and photographs, typing and editing, encouraging them so much, they found themselves occasionally chipping away at the project until 4 a.m. At the time, Fraley knew little about the project, but he was just doing what came naturally.

FOR MORE INFORMATION: Call Jennifer Rellis at 1-877-MED-ALUM.