

ROBERTE COSSELIN, M.D., PH.D.



An Untimely Frost

By Derrick F. Woodbury, M.D.

**Death is not supposed to come to
someone who is 34. Who has two toddlers.
Who has a husband who loves her deeply.
A Dartmouth Medical School graduate
writes about coping with the aching void
his wife's death has left in his own life
and that of their two young sons.**

Death lies on her like an untimely frost
Upon the sweetest flower of all the field.
— William Shakespeare, *Romeo & Juliet*

Carson is waving goodbye to me from his open bedroom window as I leave for work. "Goodbye, Dad," he calls. "Don't forget your seatbelt!" he adds. He's only three years old and shouldn't be worrying about such things, but he's concerned that something might happen to me.

"Goodbye, honey," I answer, as I back the car down the driveway and reach for my shoulder harness in an exaggerated gesture to allay his fears. "I love you."

"I love you, too. And . . . Dad!" he shouts, so that I stop the car.

"Yes, honey?" I ask, looking up into his little face.

"I'm not scared, Dad," he says, his voice breaking.

Eight months ago, my 34-year-old wife died. A board-certified anesthesiologist, a nutrition expert, and a marathon runner whose grandparents lived well into their nineties, Kate died of an aggressive ovarian cancer. As physicians, my wife and I had altered the course of disease many times to benefit our patients, but we found ourselves powerless in the face of her relentless malignancy. She was pregnant with our third child when the diagnosis was made. One hundred days later we had lost the baby and Kate was dead.

Kate was my rudder and keel, my bedrock. As I said in my wedding vows, she was my ever-fixed star. I had been deprived of my wife and soulmate, while my two boys—Carson, then age three, and Rexford, then one—had been shorn of their mother. Although only 16 months apart in age, the two boys have handled the tragedy quite differently. Rex, my youngest, was at first clingy, concerned about his needs being met. Now he plays happily. He worships his older brother, Carson. For his part, Carson is precociously articulate and bright. He is still hurting. He has learned too early that life is not safe and secure. Thankfully, we can talk about his concerns and we do. A lot. Carson remembers everything and churns ideas around in his head relentlessly. He sees the connections between things and strives to make sense of our tragedy. He is a sweet and loving child, too sensitive for the world he is to inherit.

"When will I die, Daddy?" Carson asks me as we stop for a traffic light.

The author is a 1977 graduate of Dartmouth Medical School. He has written a number of articles for previous issues of the magazine—most recently about Carson's birth ["Oh, Baby!" in the Spring 1993 issue] and before that about his mountain-climbing experiences. He practices orthopedics in Connecticut.

"Not for a very long time," I reply in the most confident tone I can muster.

This is invariably followed by a pause. Then, like a reporter at a presidential press conference, Carson asks his follow-up question: "When will you die, Daddy?"

They worry about me. They prefer me to work at home, even if I'm not playing with them. They just like to know I'm around and okay. Their anxiety is decompressed and they can play without restraint, knowing that they're not alone in the world. That they're not about to be abandoned.

The three of us miss the same activity with Mom the most: snuggling in bed as a family. Our favorite thing to do was to cuddle in our king-size bed and read stories, laugh, talk, and wrestle. Kate and I were like bookends in the bed, with the boys between us, protected from falling out. Our bed was a comfortable, secure sanctuary. A safe refuge from which to grow and learn about the world. Now there is a side rail and a huge void on Mommy's side of the bed.

Ever since I was a young adult, I've longed to be a father and to have a family of my own. I believed I'd be patient, fair, and consistent and would know how to bathe my children in love. I'd find the right mother, and together we'd nurture them so they would grow up secure, happy, and with a healthy measure of self-esteem. I found the right partner. The right mother. As an anesthesia coworker wrote to Kate just hours before she died: "Even though I was only a lowly technician, you always treated me with respect and kindness, and that was so rare. You are my hero. You're the kind of person I would like to be." When Kate got married and had her children, it was as if a light was turned on inside her. She absolutely glowed. When my boys lost their mom at ages one and three, they were robbed and I was cheated. Kate lived long enough to appreciate Carson's intelligence and sensitivity, but she missed seeing Rexie blossom as he has in the last eight months. That she missed knowing Rexie's sweetness makes me incredibly sad. It's so unfair.

From my bedroom, I can hear Carson waking up in his room. Before he climbs out of bed and comes looking for me, he speaks to the photograph of his mom hanging over his pillow.

"Good morning, Mommy," he chirps. "I love you." I hear the smack of a kiss on glass.

Then he scampers down the short hallway to my bed.

We've read many stories and books about loss and death. We started with ones like *My Mommy Has Cansur* and evolved to *The Fallen Leaf* and *When My Mommy Died*. Several months ago, the boys and I sat in the front row of "Sesame Street Live." The lights went down, and my



Carson is still hurting.

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children joined the crowd in an anticipatory squeal of delight. Out of step with everyone in the building, tears streamed down my cheeks. My heart ached because simple family events had brought Kate her greatest joy. Culling through photographs of Kate, I've been struck by how she is always beaming when captured with her mom, dad, sister, brother, or children surrounding her. She cherished the special relationship all mothers have with each other — that unspoken bond that unites women who have children. Painfully aware of this fact, I sat in the darkness amidst thousands of cheering moms and kids. With my two boys sitting on my lap and staring up in wide-eyed rapture at Big Bird, I tried to find the wherewithal to face another day without Kate. That she won't get to see the boys play soccer . . . win a spelling bee . . . is a constant melancholy that I can't shake.

Kate loved nature, the outdoors, and open spaces. She had a profound feeling for the environment and loved to go camping. She had a wonderful time picking blueberries with Carson a year ago and looked forward to introducing her boys to the wilderness, to showing them how to plant a garden, and to building a snow cave with them. A while after Kate's death, Carson and Rex were walking with me in the woods at a nearby reservoir. Carson pointed out a withered, half-fallen old tree.

"That tree is dead, Dad," he stated. He's been wrestling with the concept of death for a quarter of his short life. Like his dad, just when he thinks he has death pinned, it reverses the hold and presses him hard against the mat.

"Yes, honey," I replied.

"Mommy is dead," two-year-old Rex piped up in immediate association, happy to be able to contribute to the conversation.

"That's right, honey," I answered again. But before I could say anything else, Rex continued.

"If we were dead," he said, his bright blue eyes staring up at me, unblinking in their youthful earnestness, "then we could be with Mommy, right Dad?"

Two years old! How does a parent breathe with his insides scoured by such purity in the face of incomprehensible tragedy? I looked down at his innocent face and fumbled for words worthy of his courage.

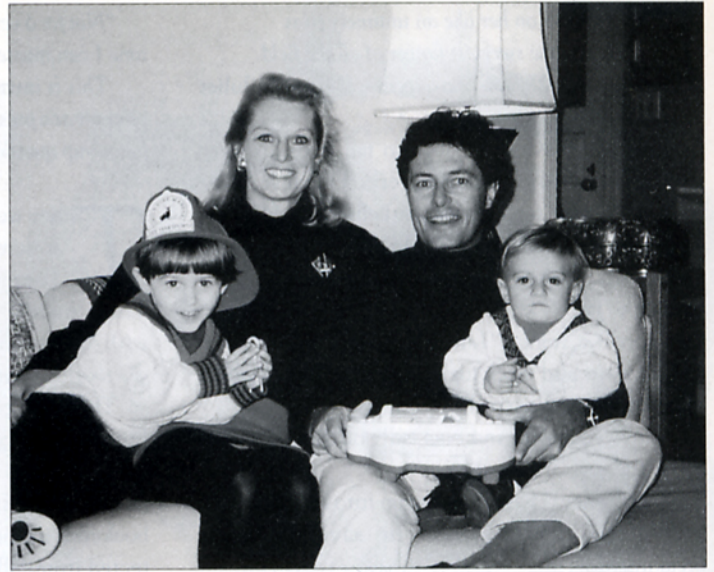
"Well, honey," I began, keenly aware of Carson's silence as he strained to hear my reply to his brother's question. "Remember, Mommy is still with us, even though we're alive and she died. Every time we think of her, she's alive in our memory. Every time we talk about her and miss her, she's alive in our hearts. So she's really with us, even though she died."

I gazed intently at the two boys to gauge the effect of my awkward stammering, but almost immediately they were off, chasing a barely-glimpsed rabbit scampering through the forest. I realized that it would be several years before I would be able to grade my efforts.

Rex usually falls asleep first at night. Carson lies in bed in the darkness and thinks. Most of the time he won't rest easy until I'm in my bed for the night. When I go in to check on him, inevitably he'll still be awake — a still, tiny figure in the shadow of the nightlight.

"I've got some Mommy questions, Dad."

His flawless skin reflects the light from the hallway as he asks: "Daddy, Santa brought Frosty back alive after he melted. Can you bring Mommy back like Santa did?" It takes me a beat to understand the reference. After all, it's September and we haven't read that story for nine months. I reply, and then Carson counters: "But what if we could find a magic hat?"



Top, a family portrait taken not long before Kate's cancer was diagnosed. Bottom, Carson in his bedroom, with photos of his mother above his bed.

We've reached the point where the only questions left are the ones no one can answer. But his little mind won't let up as he tries to organize his thinking and come to grips with the concept that his mom is dead. So we grapple together with the age-old mysteries: What happens to you when you die? Why did *our* mommy get cancer? Why didn't the medicine make her better? Why don't your eyes work anymore when you're dead? How come it doesn't hurt when you die?

When we get to questions about firefighters and astronauts, I know that he's done his work for the night and should soon be able to sleep.

Then it becomes very quiet in the house, and it's my turn.

2:00 a.m.

4:00 a.m.

I pace the house in the dark. Like a phantom, I wander about my own home, moving from room to room, holding different framed photos of Kate to the moonlight for a better look. Sometimes, in an out-of-body experience, I'll watch myself shuffling about, pausing to soak in the

memories of Kate. Her spirit is almost palpable around our familiar things, so I cling to them. It's a connection of sorts. Experts say time will heal these wounds, and I take that to mean that in time her presence, her scent, her laughter will not still be wafting through the air. In a natural defense reaction, my mind will eventually bury these acute sensations. Future events and new experiences will push this connection deep into the recesses of my subconscious. So before I lose it, I try to savor it.

Sometimes I put on headphones and listen to the music of my formative youth — Jim Croce, John Lennon, Harry Chapin — all dead now, struck down in their prime, with young children left fatherless. Can I hear the foreshadowing in their haunting lyrics? What am I to think when I listen to the beautiful thoughts these young men put to music?

Then I crawl back into bed and stare at the shadows on the ceiling, waiting for one of my children to sleepwalk out of his bed and crawl into mine. I cherish this human contact, the only true comfort I know.

No marriage is perfect, and we had our share of disagreements. They all seem so trivial in retrospect. I keep thinking that there has to be some way I can bring Kate back. I've been able to exert my will over most situations thus far in my life, but I can't do that here. Death is so final, the frustration so total.

If I could only fly around the earth counterclockwise at the speed of light to go back in time and save Kate, like Superman saved Lois Lane. With profound sadness, I imagine that Christopher Reeve has had the same thought regarding his own plight.

I think of Christopher Reeve and his wife, Dana. We had a brief interaction about five years ago, and I was struck by his vibrancy and athleticism. Before Kate died, I would have considered euthanasia in a circumstance such as Reeve's. Now, however, I realize why he forges on — even prospers. What I miss about Kate most is not her physical presence but her mind and spirit. I miss talking to her. I miss her counsel. I miss telling her my thoughts and concerns. I miss her take on things. Even if she were imprisoned in a paralyzed body that wouldn't respond to her brain, she would still be Kate. The part of her that loved us would still be there. The part of her that interpreted life would still be active. She would still be Mom.

When Kate's gravestone arrived and was put into the ground, Carson, Rex, and I went to visit. Unbidden, Carson knelt down, kissed the cold marble, and hugged it as best he could.

"I love you, Mommy," he said unabashedly.

I stared in awe and pride, then turned my head as tears flowed from my eyes.

Kate somehow managed to juggle the roles of wife, mother, physician, and friend with an effortlessness that belied the work involved. Before Kate died, I thought I was a role model for the New Age, sensitive, involved father. I even got quite miffed at Kate one night when we were out to dinner with friends and she responded to a query by casually observing that most child care in the '90s still fell on the mother. I huffed and puffed with a long, sincere, passionate recitation of how much I contributed to parenthood. I wince now at the memory of that occasion, because I didn't have a clue about what is *really* involved in parenting. I suspect most men feel as I did — that they are right there in the child-rearing trenches with their wives. In truth, however, the things that make up a life, consume a day, and push a family forward are usually done by Mom. Buying clothes that fit and food that's healthy. Arranging the teacher visits and school transportation. When the days are going smoothly, we men rarely realize the myriad of details that allow for such a ripple-free existence.

Although a couple of friends have told me I'm handling things with poise, I am not indomitable. I may appear so outwardly, but I hurt badly and feel weighed down by sadness. I am an actor, pretending to be okay. I lost 15 pounds in the first couple of weeks after Kate's death. Most of it seems to have dropped from my face, leaving me with a chronically gaunt look. Like someone touched by death. I push on from sheer inertia, but I feel like the Wizard of Oz: Putting on a show with smoke and mirrors, while behind the curtain hides a scared little man.

No one knows how to deal with people who are touched by death. Those who know about my loss treat me differently now. Nurses who used to banter with me now don't know what to say. Silences become awkward, and occasionally I sense that coworkers are frightened in some primordial fashion, as if the misfortune in my life might be contagious.

Sometimes my grief feels conspicuous and spills over into paranoia. I bought something with cash in a local store the other day, and the cashier insolently demanded my phone number. I declined. She insisted. She called the manager. I didn't believe in the store's policy, and my obstinance had nothing to do with Kate's illness. Yet I felt as though the people behind me in line were about to intervene: "Don't mind him. He recently lost his wife."

I realize that everything in life is meaningless when compared to death, but work in general seems a futile exercise. Kate loved being a doctor. It gave her a perfect outlet for the kindness and compassion that coursed through her being. She was at her best when



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taking care of other people — whether it was her patients, her children, or her husband. There are many physicians for whom medicine is their *raison d'être*, but I now feel that I should spend my time with my boys. Unlike many physicians, I have never labored under the illusion that any given doctor is indispensable. If I don't see my patients, there are numerous competent doctors quite willing to pick up the slack. My patients would go on without my services and not miss a beat. But if I'm not there for my boys, there's no one else to care for or stimulate them.

So I've rearranged my schedule, and as I pull away from preschool two mornings a week I try not to let the mothers see my tears. My boys are so brave as they push on with their lives. Their mom would be so proud of them. It would warm her heart to see them with their little backpacks and their pure little faces. It wrenches my heart out every Tuesday and Friday when I drop them off.

My relationship with my sons is necessarily more intense than that of most parents with their children. As one friend said: "My goodness, you'll be everything to them!" I have tried to look upon this as a blessing, yet my appreciation of this magical toddler time in their lives has been brutally tempered. Whenever they do or say something cute, I inevitably feel a pang of sadness in my heart as I realize how happy their mom would have been to see or hear it.

And I have discovered that a lot of the joy in being a parent is to be found in sharing those moments with the person with whom you created the child: "Look what we've made. Can you believe it?" My joy is muted by my aloneness. The constant ache of Kate's inability to share these precious moments saps the fun. I try not to let the boys sense this. To some degree I'm successful.

In the first weeks after Kate's death, I was acutely conscious of being accident-prone. It was an overwhelming gestalt. I drove tentatively, feeling intensely vulnerable to the stupid decisions that other people make with their cars. I was waiting for the other shoe to drop. I was unable to suppress the desperate feeling that washed over me as I watched my children at play.

Even under normal circumstances, I see the potential for accidents in every daily activity. Prior to fatherhood, I'd participated in some thrilling endeavors, having climbed the highest mountains on five of the seven continents, but being a single parent exponentially heightened my awareness of risk. Much of that concern comes from years of practicing orthopedic surgery. Behind every mangled limb there is a history, a mechanism of injury. After years of hearing these stories, a pattern develops and you see danger lurking behind every activity.

This is a real problem when you are the solo parent of two toddlers. The man-to-man defense has to be scrapped and you're forced into a zone. And as anyone can tell you — especially my kids — it's easy to score on a zone defense. I half expected a social worker from the Department of Youth Services to pull up any moment: "What makes you think you can raise these children by yourself, sir? Could we see your parental license? . . . Just as we suspected. I'm sorry, sir, but without their mommy here, these children will have to come along with us." Surely an injury to one of the boys would prove my incompetence without Kate?

About 10 days after Kate's death, my worst fears were almost realized. I had just arrived home from work. The kids were eager to see me and wanted to come upstairs while I changed my clothes. Carson had my attention as I was stripping to my briefs, when I heard the unmistakable sound of a little person tumbling down the stairs. I bolted to the head of

the stairway in time to see Rex — not yet two years old — make eye contact with me as he passed the halfway point, a stair landing that makes a right-angle turn. He was tumbling headfirst, on his way to the slate floor at the base of the stairs. Reflexively, I leaped to the landing. Now Rexie was below me, out of reach, halfway down the last section and gaining speed. Without thinking, I leaped over him to the floor below, pivoting as I hit the slate (how I avoided snapping my own ankle, I don't know). I managed to catch Rex's head just inches from the stone floor and sweep him into my arms.

He looked at me in amazement, and then we both began to shake and wail. Both of us were unhurt but incredibly frightened. It took about an hour before the adrenalin subsided and I stopped trembling.

As a scientist of sorts — or at least someone with a doctorate in one of the sciences — I'm familiar with the second law of thermodynamics, the law of entropy. People may on some level think life is capricious and our fortunes can be turned upside down in a heartbeat. But optimism generally prevails. How can one marry and start a family if you don't believe in the future? Science, however, is not shackled by such romantic inclinations. Science quietly insists that the universe is random and the law of probability *will* prevail, that we humans are destined to fail as we attempt to impose order on a system that is more stable in chaos. I tune my guitar, but it quickly falls out of tune to its own state of equilibrium — hopelessly off key.

I resent and despise all the cancer-help books, filled to the brim with their tall tales of individual miracle cases, sanctimonious testimonials, and pseudoscientific surveys that prey upon people caught in desperate circumstances. In our situation, these books and diets wasted precious time and emotional energy that could have been spent with family and friends. Their *modus operandi* of guilt is unconscionable. Their premise — that if you permit yourself to think anything less than positive thoughts about the disease, you are allowing the cancer to grow, thereby making you responsible for the cancer — is absurd and obstructs realistic preparation for death. The changes in our life came so fast and furious that we were just reacting as best we could, always thinking we had more time. And then it was over, and my wife, the mother of my children, my soulmate and best friend was dead.

I'm more aware of suffering now. Every day, the paper is plastered with senseless tragedy, and I pause to imagine the grief and sorrow of these families. I find it hard to fathom that there is this much suffering in the world. Like Carson, I can't figure out *why*.

The avalanche of cards was wonderful, but then people get on with their lives. They have their own problems and unconsciously probably recoil from a reminder of the fickleness of fate. The friends and family who surprise you with their assistance are a joy. Those who don't rise to the occasion, or somehow add to your burden, are a disappointment. It is hard not to feel contempt for those who let you down when you need them the most.

I am acutely aware of women wearing scarves around their heads now. I watch them closely in restaurants or shopping malls, wondering if they didn't have time to wash their hair that morning or if their body is coursing with the crude poison of chemotherapy. I close my eyes and remember Kate's golden, flaxen mane — soft, fine strands of what one would imagine poets mean by "angel hair." I find solace in the recollection that Kate was able to walk around the house bald and without head cover. I feel it meant



Derrik Woodbury with his sons Rex (left) and Carson (right), a few months after his wife Kate's death.

that she knew her three boys loved her completely and were not put off by her unusual appearance. She was comfortable in her family's love, and I find comfort in that knowledge.

Although I had a hundred days to get ready for life without Kate, I was not prepared. It took all my energy to care for her and support her through her battle with the cancer. Like frostbitten fingers that only hurt when they begin to thaw, my numb brain thawed out only after the memorial service; then the true pain began. In looking back, I sense that even in her illness, Kate was taking care of me more than I was taking care of her. She was scared of dying, but in a final videotape we made, her predominant emotion was sadness because she felt she was abandoning her husband and children when she knew how much they needed her. Her dignity was breathtaking.

I am better at missing Kate than I was at loving her. That may seem like a harsh commentary, but my mind won't allow me the peace of knowing I loved

Kate well enough — mainly because I didn't let her see my profound sadness when she was still alive and we were fighting her horrible disease. At the time, I thought it best to show optimism and unbridled confidence that we would become the anecdotal case and beat her cancer. I saved my tears and fears for the solitary car rides to and from work. It's a wonder I didn't run off the road.

When, late at night, Kate's fevers would scorch our bed and I would soothe her burning forehead with cold washcloths . . . when I loved her with scars on her body and no hair on her head . . . I believe she felt a peace that I am able only now to realize. But I think that if she had also known of my desolation, she would have truly known the depth of my love.

There are still days when it hurts so much I don't think I'll survive the pain; I'm not sure I'll ever catch my breath again. I'll wail to myself in the car or late at night in my study. What triggers this lability? A song. A thought. A smile from one of my boys. It doesn't take much. So we stay pretty close to home. There is security in routine. It gives our crumbled world a false sense of order. The underside of such a pulling-inward, however, is a feeling of being trapped. A desperate foreboding that my life is over. At least my life as I knew and loved it.

Yet my children and I laugh frequently and heartily. The boys are too young to be forced to learn that fate is whimsical and random and life ultimately hard and disappointing. We examine the ironies of life and laugh at them together. We talk about Mommy often. At first it was hard. Now it seems natural. Whenever they see anything pink, that's cause for them to remember out loud that it was Mommy's favorite color. Or when they see a beautiful sunset, they will chime in with the observation that "Mommy would have liked that!"

Meanwhile, I feel as if I've had an eye plucked out. Intellectually, know I should still be able to see — just not as well. The eye socket will heal, but I'll always wear a patch; when it rains, my lost eye will ache deep in my head.

As I gaze around our living room and think of loving again, I realize the daunting task another woman would have in trying to become a part of my life. There are beautiful pictures of Kate everywhere, and my inclination is to put up still more. I know this is enshrinement, but I don't want the boys to forget the mother who loved them more than life itself. I want the boys to know their mother so they won't have to make her up.

I know that someday there will be room for another woman in my life, but Kate will always be a part of

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My mind won't allow me the peace of knowing I loved Kate well enough — mainly because I didn't let her see my profound sadness when we were fighting her horrible disease. At the time, I thought it best to show unbridled confidence.



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An Untimely Frost

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me — like my right arm or my left leg. The love she gave me will never leave; no one can take that away. That love will be as much a part of me as my skin until I, too, pass away. It will take a very special person to understand that — to realize that it's not threatening. That it just is.

I have come some distance to this spot I haven't left since Kate died. The boys and I have survived eight months somehow. Soon a day will go by without tears. Yet it seems like only last night when I took one last, loving look at Kate's pink toenails. One last, longing gaze at her lifeless face. I was not yet able to comprehend the roaring silence and the numbing

finality of her death as I gently kissed her one last time before pulling the bedsheet over her still figure . . . her fierce, courageous struggle to stay with her husband and children finally at an end.

I am a poet at heart, and I like the image of Kate being present in the morning light, in the gentle wind caressing my cheek, in all things beautiful. And if she came from the earth and the stars, then she is in all those things every day. But it is not enough. I want to see her, hold her hand, feel her lips on mine . . . and, most of all, I want to talk to her. The sun and the wind are not enough. ■

Obituaries

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for his DMS class and was also a member of the national committee for the 1960 Medical School capital campaign.

He is survived by his wife, Elizabeth, known as "Betts," and by three children — David, DC '62; Ann; and Nancy.

Robert Fulton Korn '35

died on October 3, 1995. Until his retirement in 1981, he was an epidemiologist with the New York State Department of Health, where he worked with Dr. Jonas Salk on the field trial for the polio vaccine.

After graduating from Dartmouth College in 1934, he went on to Dartmouth Medical School and graduated with the Class of 1935. He earned his M.D. at Johns Hopkins Medical School in 1937 and interned at Johns Hopkins's Harriet Lane Home. He then joined the New York State Department of Health as a district health officer and in 1945 became assistant director of the Division of Communicable Disease Control. At that time he was also an associate professor of preventative medicine at Albany Medical School.

In 1949, he became director of the Bureau of Epidemiology and Communicable Disease Control and in 1954 the deputy director of the polio vaccine evaluation program, operated in conjunction with the University of Michigan. During the latter part of his career he was more involved with research, becoming in 1955 the assistant commissioner for public health research development and evaluation.

He was a member of many medical organizations, including the New York State Medical Society, the American Epidemiological Society, the American Society for Clinical Research, and the American Public Health

Association. He was also a fellow of the American Heart Association. During his retirement he traveled to China, where he was born and had lived until he was 14, as well as to Egypt, Israel, and Jordan. He enjoyed music, ornithology, and working outdoors.

Dr. Korn is survived by five children — Julianne, Nancy, Thomas, Robert, and Stephen. His wife, Esther, predeceased him.

Jeffrey Allen Laser '76

died in December 1995. He had maintained a private practice in cardiology in San Dimas, Calif.

In 1973, he graduated from Yale University with a B.S. in molecular biophysics and biochemistry before going on to DMS. After receiving his medical degree in 1976, he completed his residency at the University of Oregon Medical Center and then in 1980-81 served in the Air Force in Okinawa, Japan.

From 1982 to 1985, he held a fellowship in cardiology at Stanford University. Then from 1986 to 1988, he was a cardiologist on the staff of the Latter Day Saints Hospital in Salt Lake City, Utah, as well as a clinical associate professor of medicine at the University of Utah. In 1986, he also joined a group practice, Cardiology Consultants of Utah.

In 1988, he was elected a fellow of the American College of Cardiology. He was also involved in a company that manufactured disposable surgical appliances, Merit Medical Systems, Inc., and was named a director of the firm in 1992. In addition, he wrote a number of articles on cardiology and interventional medicine. Dr. Laser had moved to California within the last few years.

He is survived by his wife, Jane, and three children — Heather, Jonathan, and Rachel. ■