

**John Lyons, Jr., M.D.: In good hands**

By Eliza C. Mackintosh

**D**r. John “Jack” Lyons kneels in the soil at the Willing Hands garden, weeding around rows of tangled snap peas. Black dirt lines his fingernails and the creases of his hands. He stands up to admire the progress of the just-tasseling corn. His tall, thin frame towers above the rows and rows of vegetables on the acre of land in East Thetford, Vt., used by Willing Hands, a nonprofit organization that distributes fresh produce to people in need throughout the Upper Valley.

As the former chief of general and vascular surgery at Mary Hitchcock Memorial Hospital, as well as one-time director of its intensive care unit and surgical residency program, Lyons spent most of his life caring for patients, not plants, with impeccably scrubbed hands. Nowadays, he splits his time between teaching anatomy and surgery at DMS and serving as president of the board of directors of Willing Hands.

Standing amid a flock of Dartmouth medical student volunteers in the Willing Hands garden, Lyons chats and laughs, his hands alternating between gesturing with enthusiasm and extracting weeds. His passion for gardening dates back many years. On this same Thetford farm, in 1983, he established Sunny Fields Berry Farm, which at one time was among the largest raspberry patches in Vermont. Now, many of the rows of berries have given way to the Willing Hands garden, which lies behind the berry bushes on Lyons’s land.

Lyons’s interests and activities extend far beyond the Upper Valley, however. Long before the concept of global citizenship became fashionable, he became involved in numerous international organizations and endeavors, including starting a summer language program for DMS students in Antigua, Guatemala, in 1998. That same year, he was a founding member of the executive board of the Dartmouth International Health Group, an organization that fosters involvement by DMS students in the global health arena. Lyons was also a driving force nationally, from 1997 to 2002, behind an organization now known as the Global Health Education Consortium, a nonprofit composed of medical educators dedicated to increasing the health and human rights of underserved populations worldwide and to improving

**Born:** Washington, D.C.

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**Education:** Virginia Military Institute (VMI) B.S. '50, Harvard Medical School M.D. '55

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**Training:** Mary Hitchcock (surgery resident and cardiovascular research fellow), Harvard (surgery research fellow)

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**First teaching job:** Physics instructor at VMI

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**Claim to fame:** He once owned one of the largest raspberry patches in Vermont

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**Family:** Wife Terry Lyons, a member of the board of Willing Hands, and four grown children—three sons and a daughter

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medical teaching and training. In recognition of his many accomplishments serving patients, students, and the public, Lyons received the inaugural Lifetime Achievement Award from Dartmouth’s Thomas P. Almy Chapter of the Gold Humanism Honor Society. And not only was he the first recipient of the new award, but it was named in his honor and from now on will be called the John H. Lyons, M.D., Award. The Arnold P. Gold Foundation, which created the Gold Honor Society, considers humanism in medicine to encompass integrity, excellence, compassion, altruism, respect,

empathy, and service—all qualities Lyons has long been known for. But the honoree himself was taken unawares by the award. “It really blew me away,” Lyons says. “I was totally surprised.”

His colleagues, however, were not the least bit surprised. Dr. Arnold Fabricant, an assistant professor of anatomy, was one of the faculty members who nominated Lyons for the award. Fabricant says that he has met few people like Lyons, as either a colleague or a friend, and that he considers him extremely deserving of the award. Fabricant calls Lyons the “quintessential” humanist, a “sort of a Renaissance type of individual.”

**L**yons was captivated by medicine early on. He always knew he wanted to follow in his father’s footsteps by becoming a surgeon, and he has no regrets about that decision. “Medicine has been a wonderful profession for me,” he says, a “wonderful life, really.”

As a surgeon, Lyons was known for being uncommonly compassionate. Dr. Dean Seibert, a Dartmouth colleague who met Lyons in 1961 when Seibert was a resident in hematology at MHMH, was impressed by Lyons’s drive to go to any lengths for his patients. “If there was some slight possibility that the patient would survive, he would do absolutely anything he could,” Seibert recalls.

He remembers helping Lyons with one particular patient who was in critical condition with severe hepatitis, an inflammation of the liver. Early in his career, in Boston, Lyons had participated in an experimental procedure in which a healthy pig’s liver was perfused with a patient’s blood to remove some of its toxic products. He surmised that such a process might buy a little more time for this patient’s liver to repair itself. So he bought a pig and carried out the perfusion several times. Although in the end the procedure did not save the woman’s

*Mackintosh, one of two summer-term editorial interns at DARTMOUTH MEDICINE, just started her junior year at the University of New Hampshire (UNH). A double major in English journalism and communication, she has been a contributor to the UNH student newspaper and an editor of Main Street Magazine, a student-run campus magazine.*

life, Seibert adds, he says that Lyons was always committed to taking that kind of extra step for his patients.

The transition from practicing surgery to teaching was a natural one for Lyons. “I always loved teaching,” he says, which is why he chose to spend his career in academic medicine. But while many retired surgeons end up teaching anatomy, Lyons was particularly drawn to doing so—and medical students have been particularly drawn to him.

Jennifer Vines, a 2002 graduate of DMS (as well as a 1998 graduate of Dartmouth College), initially felt intimidated by the first-year anatomy course that Lyons teaches. But her apprehension disappeared the day that he lectured on varicose veins and, in front of the classroom full of young medical students, hiked up his pants leg to reveal his own varicose veins.

“He’s a vascular surgeon—he’s about as high-powered as it gets—but he’s so approachable and humble,” says Vines. “I just really liked him from day one.”

She had actually first met him when she was a sophomore romance languages major at Dartmouth College and was looking to get involved with something at the Medical School. She ended up teaching a medical Spanish class, which eventually grew into the summer Spanish program that Lyons ran in Antigua. The Antigua program was designed to help DMS students learn Spanish, gain clinical experience, and get exposure to the culture and health-care delivery system of a developing country.

Although the program in Antigua ended two summers ago due to safety concerns in the region, Lyons has since started a similar program for DMS students in Ecuador. His hope is that such experiences will inspire students to make global and public health a part of their careers for the rest of their lives, and that seems to be the case for many participants.

Vines for example, focuses on tuberculosis in her primary-care and public-health practice in Portland, Ore. Her interests, she says, are due partially to the sense of purpose that Lyons instilled in her. He encouraged her to “ask the larger questions about health and even about social justice. He did it very quietly, but he does it well, and I think it really influences people. It certainly influenced me,” Vines says.

The connections that Lyons is able to establish with students are



JON GILBERT FOX

**Nowadays, Lyons teaches anatomy to medical students, recruits them to volunteer in the Willing Hands vegetable garden, and is involved in several global initiatives.**

due in large part to his capacity as a listener. “You get the sense that he’s got time to listen to you, to think about what you’re saying, and certainly to give you feedback,” Fabricant says. “Students feel very comfortable talking to him about whatever’s on their mind.”

Another of Lyons’s efforts to offer students experiential learning opportunities is a program called Ohiyesa. This organization—which bears the tribal name of a Sioux alumnus of Dartmouth College, Charles Eastman, who became a doctor—provides students in the health field with firsthand experiences in international health. Lyons has served, along with his

longtime friend and colleague Dean Seibert, on Ohiyesa’s board since 1998. Together, the two evaluate DMS student proposals for projects throughout the developing world. If a project meets their criteria—first and foremost being “leaving something behind”—then the student receives funds to pursue the effort, as well as support and advice from both a Dartmouth-based and a site-based mentor.

Lyons’s dedication to global and public-health issues intersects his commitment to education in the form of the Willing Hands project. Each week, the organization distributes about 3.5 tons of fresh produce from area grocery stores and farms, as well as from the East Thetford garden, to organizations such as food shelves, churches, and senior centers. The goal is to ensure that those in need receive not just shelf-stable packaged goods but also fresh, healthy fruits and vegetables. In addition, Willing Hands runs a nutrition education program that teaches people how to prepare the produce they receive.

**A**ll summer long, Lyons spends every Tuesday morning and Thursday evening in the Willing Hands garden, getting his hands dirty alongside the rest of the organization’s volunteers. On this particular day, despite the hot late-afternoon sun, he is quick to smile and laugh as he pulls up countless weeds by the roots.

“Bright people are a dime a dozen,” observes Lyons’s colleague Dean Seibert, “but a bright, wise person is much more rare. He combines those two things. . . . He becomes just extraordinarily knowledgeable about whatever it is he’s engaged in—whether that’s surgery, teaching anatomy, . . . raising raspberries. Whatever the case, he delights in getting right to the bottom of it.” ■