

Mark Washburn



## A LEGACY OF CONNECTING HEARTS AND MINDS

**D**EEMED THE “HEART AND SOUL” OF DARTMOUTH’S MEDICAL SCHOOL by then President James O. Freedman, Joseph O’Donnell (Med’71), did not readily accept the moniker. “To begin with, I was always a bit embarrassed about it,” O’Donnell says. “But I now love it.”

O’Donnell, a professor of medicine, best known for his devotion to student well-being and compassion-centered medicine, is retiring after 42 years of teaching and mentoring aspiring doctors at Geisel School of Medicine. Although his teaching schedule is lighter and he is less present on campus, he says he will continue working to ensure heart and soul are solidly embedded in the organizational culture of the school.

Former student and colleague Leslie Fall (Med’90), says of O’Donnell, “His deep dedication and true love for the school comes across in every interaction—student well-being has been his life’s mission and I doubt a day goes by that he is not thinking about the school or its current and past students.”

Becoming interim associate dean for academic and student affairs in 1986 sent O’Donnell on a life-changing journey—a journey he describes as giving his life meaning and purpose.

It began as a simple request by President Freedman for O’Donnell to assemble a group of medical students to breakfast with author and humanist Robert Coles, MD—who was on campus to deliver Dartmouth’s fall convocation address. Engrossed in conversation about the future of medical education, the two men lingered long past breakfast’s end.

“Coles’ approach to service and his emphasis on using great literature to encourage medical students and physicians to take time for reflection became my approach—he opened in me a nascent love of the arts and humanities and it changed me,” O’Donnell recalls. “He became my mentor and his books, *The Call of Stories* and *The Call of Service*, became my guidebooks.”

Much has been written about O’Donnell’s numerous accomplishments and dedication to community service, humanism in medicine, and the hidden curriculum, which led to the development of many influential and nota-

ble outcomes. But shaping medical students’ moral growth outside the classroom, in what he calls the informal and hidden curricular spaces, became his life’s work—and for him, this important space defines Geisel’s institutional culture of compassionate care.

“Joe and I have known each other since the 1970s—he is a presence and a force supporting kindness, collaboration, and community engagement, which for him are the essential elements of compassion-centered medical care,” says Martha McDaniel, MD, a longtime colleague. “His devotion to Geisel—especially to medical students—has been unswerving and profound. I’ll miss his partnership, support, and boundless enthusiasm.”

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For Joseph Graterol (Med’15), O’Donnell’s dedication to medical education along with his concern for each student’s well-being are worthy of note, “Dr. O’Donnell is part of the heart and soul of Geisel and someone I look up to. I will always strive to be a fraction of the doctor, teacher, and overall person that he is.”

Looking back on his journey, the soft-spoken O’Donnell says, “I’ve dedicated myself to living a life of meaning. For me medicine has been a love story and I want our students to feel the same love and joy that I’ve felt for medicine throughout my career.”

SUSAN GREEN

### THE JOSEPH O’DONNELL FUND: PROMOTING WELLNESS, COMPASSION, AND SERVICE

Dr. Joe O’Donnell has nurtured generations of medical students, helping them stay grounded in the humanistic reasons that brought them to medical school—the desire to comfort, to heal, and to serve others.

With Joe’s retirement, Geisel is looking to its alumni and to those who have been influenced by him to help ensure that his vision and the types of programs he helped create thrive for decades to come.

**If you would like to contribute to the fund in honor of Joe or for more information, please contact Sara Lang at (603) 653-0765 or [Sara.M.Lang@Dartmouth.edu](mailto:Sara.M.Lang@Dartmouth.edu).**