

Walter G. "Jerry" Saunders

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In 2004, Saunders traveled to Afghanistan as part of the U.S. Department of Health and Social Services contingent that was working to reduce the very high maternal and infant mortality in that country. As part of that effort, he helped to teach better medical techniques to attending physicians and residents at a hospital. "I did what I could in a secular Islamic environment," where he says he could not touch a woman's body without her husband present and where many of the female physicians had been kept by the Taliban from practicing medicine.

"Our team tried to help bring the Afghan doctors up to Western standards." Previously, in all of Saunders' lifetime as an obstetrician, he never witnessed a maternal death. However, the hospital in Afghanistan averaged four to six maternal deaths per month, and he saw several occur while there. "We did some good - we saved some lives. But it was like putting a finger in a dike."

Outside of the world of medicine, from 1991 to 2003 Saunders was a member of the UW Board of Trustees and was its president from 1995 to 1996. He saw many changes and improvements at UW during years he spent on the board. "My time as a trustee was one of the most rewarding times of my life," Saunders recalls. "I spent 12 years working with people who were bright and had a love for the university." He recounts being in that position during difficult times, when the university had little money, and when the trustees made the decision to cut the longstanding men's baseball program. Among the accomplishments of his tenure as a trustee, Saunders counts the new geology and botany facilities, and the institution, for the first time, of admissions requirements for entering students.

During his time as a trustee, Saunders was an essential force in the formation of the WWAMI program, which provides medical teaching curricula and placement opportunities for UW medical students.

"One benefit of the program is that student can attend their first year of medical school in Wyoming and can come together as a class. It is a good transition between undergraduate and graduate school." After students complete that first year together, they then continue experience primary health care in a variety of settings within the five participating states. Phil Dubois, former president of UW and now chancellor at the University



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of North Carolina at Charlotte, recalls Saunders' efforts on behalf of a range of entities UW.

"As anyone who knows Jerry would expect, he carried out his responsibilities in a very thorough and thoughtful way. I cannot remember him missing a meeting, even when our famous Wyoming weather was starting to kick up. Indeed, it was not unusual for me to look down the aisle at the basketball games and find Jerry in his seat, even on weekdays or weekends when we did not have a Trustee meeting scheduled. Because of his dedication to the Cowboys, Jerry treated the drive from Sheridan to Laramie like he was going down to the corner grocery store!"

Dubois says, "Perhaps the most significant contribution Jerry made during his time on the Board was his role in the development of the Strategic Plan for Intercollegiate Athletics. Although the Board was deeply divided on some parts of that initiative, Jerry calmly and gently nudged his colleagues to support the plan which, as you know, led to a special legislative appropriation to support both operations and athletic facility improvements."

Saunders explains that although he never placed athletics above academics, he had to do some convincing of his fellow trustees that athletics "was part of the university" and would benefit from a plan, just like the sort that was being developed for academic programs. "We needed to plan for what it would take to be more competitive. I take some ownership for that."

Additionally, he's taken ownership for his education. He showed great promise as a UW undergrad, being named "Outstanding Freshman Premed Student." He was a member of the Sigma Nu fraternity, Alpha Epsilon Delta pre-med honorary, and

Phi Epsilon Phi Sophomore men's honorary. But somewhere between his undergraduate program at UW and his medical training in Colorado, Saunders was unaware he was short one Fine Arts credit. It was in 1995 that Saunders made the discovery and enrolled in a Music Appreciation course through correspondence study. He thus completed his degree in Natural Science and Math from UW. As a trustee, he was in the unique position of signing his own diploma. Although Saunders' wife Jeri passed away in 2004, he has remained in Sheridan where he is at work on a

medical novel he hopes to publish one day. He remarried and spends time with his wife Myrna (Robbins) Saunders BA '93 and his three grown daughters, enjoys the Wyoming outdoors, and hunts and fishes with his sons-in-law and grandchildren.

Reflecting on being named a Distinguished Alumni, Saunders says he feels flattered by a "tremendous honor." He didn't go through his professional life with the idea in mind of being given an award, he says. "When I look at the other names on the list over the years, I feel gratified and humbled." ❖

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by Julianne Couch
Alumnews Editor

Distinguished Alumnus, physician, and former UW Trustee Walter G. "Jerry" Saunders has gained the respect of some very distinguished people. Sen. Mike Enzi, for example, credits Saunders' "calm demeanor" for the relatively easy birth of two of his children. Over the years, Saunders has gained the respect of many around Wyoming and the UW community, as well as nationally.

Saunders began his career as an obstetrician and gynecologist by attending the University of Wyoming from 1959 to 1962. He left UW for the University of Colorado School of Medicine then obtained his postgraduate training at the University of New Mexico. He, his wife the former Jeri Wilmot (BA, '63), and their three children moved to Sheridan in 1973 where he opened a solo Ob/Gyn practice.

He and his partners delivered several hundred babies a year around the region, peaking at a high of 400 one year. (That was in a year he didn't have partners.) Saunders also became a consultant for area hospitals, and for 15 years his practice handled all the high risk obstetrics and performed the gynecological surgery for the U.S. Public Health Service Hospital in Crow Agency, Mont.

Despite the busy work load, Saunders found time for professional organizations. While chair of the Wyoming Medical Society in 1984, he advocated for medical public policy issues concerning the joint and several liability law. Under the old law, Saunders explains, if three people were accused of medical malpractice at varying levels of responsibility and two of them settled, the third person would have been left with 100 percent of the responsibility even if their true responsibility was minor.

According to Duane Woodard, who nominated Saunders for this award, "had this particular law not been amended by the legislature ... the law would have had the ultimate effect of driving many obstetric and gynecology specialists from the State of Wyoming, leaving communities without the services of many medical specialties."

Saunders' accomplishments include service as Section Chairman for the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists from 1987 to 1990, and as examiner for the American Board of Obstetricians and Gynecologists from 1983 to 1993. He served on all the committees at Memorial Hospital of Sheridan County, where he was Chief of Staff for two years, and chaired the Long Range Planning Committee. Saunders currently lectures at the Family Practice Residency Program in Casper, and is a physician volunteer at the Free Clinic in Sheridan, seeing uninsured adults.

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