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FEATURED

TOP STORY

Looking back at a life lived with intensity

Region benefited from pharmacist Roentsch's compound interests

By PAUL MILLER Sentinel Staff

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Longtime Keene pharmacist E. George Roentsch died last week.

COURTESY PHOTO

It's one of life's odd orderings: Sometimes it takes the death of a special individual to bring to life his full story.

So here we are, peeling back the life of E. George Roentsch, who died at his Stoddard home last week. He was 82.

Not every community is fortunate to have a George Roentsch. This region did, and those who knew him are quick to want to provide color and texture to the portrait of a man they say meant so much to so many.

Their brushstrokes are words and phrases like “fierce”; “intelligent”; “brilliant”; “passionate”; “caring”; “avid reader”; “Yankee fanatic”; “gracious”; “at times cantankerous” and “superstar.”

Their stories — the subtle highlights that give shape and strength to his image — range from tender to serious, funny to inspirational.

A community pharmacist at The Apothecary on Main Street in Keene for more than five decades, Roentsch achieved fixture status in these parts and professional notoriety across the United States. He was, to borrow another brushstroke, a “pioneer.”

“People back home (in Keene) wouldn’t know it, but he was an icon within his profession who, through his vision, innovation and enthusiasm, changed and grew an entire industry,” says David Rochefort, a pharmacist from Littleton.

Roentsch had not worked at his pharmacy for more than two years, after suffering a heart attack in September 2009.

His resume is long and varied. From the highlight reel, a hint of what defined him:

His ability to compound, a practice with ancient roots that involves mixing drugs to match unique and specific patient needs, was, throughout his career, without peer; he sparred with politicians and celebrities, delighting as much in the round-by-round exchanges as the decision; his cleverness was surpassed only by his intellect; he was a recipient of three military service medals and a three-term Keene city councilor; to miss a Yankees game — radio, television or in person — was, to be blunt, a failure of felonious proportions in his eyes.

Those who worked for Roentsch found his devotion bracing and sustaining. Those who were friends with him found his conversation genuine and entertaining.

And those who found relief from his thoughtful, customized medicines, who got a no-strings-attached pass and come-again smile when the checkbook was void and the child was sick, well, no words required.

Rochefort calls Roentsch the patriarch of compounding. He pretty much wrote the book, if not literally then figuratively, Rochefort says.

“I had a dream to do compounding as a career. I was laughed at by my professor. At that time the whole approach was to go clinical. George Roentsch showed me, and all compounders everywhere, there is no better way to practice clinical pharmacy than to be a compounder,” Rochefort says.

“You work directly with the patient, using knowledge only you know. You are able to treat the patient optimally.

“He, more than anyone, revolutionized an entire industry.”

Traditional practices rule today’s pharmacies, though 85 percent of the prescriptions filled today at The Apothecary remain compound mixtures. But, Rochefort says, compounding will never go away and its place in prescription medicine may, in fact, be strengthening in the face of growing credibility issues surrounding the sale and marketing practices of the nation’s big pharmaceutical companies.

Roentsch didn’t just practice compounding as a form of pharmacy, he spoke on its merits at conventions and lectures and lobbied on its behalf in the halls of Washington, D.C.

“All the things we continue to do today, either he discovered, or shared with us,” Rochefort says of Roentsch. “Twenty-five percent of the things I did yesterday at work were a direct result of George or have his fingerprints on it.

“There’s not a compounding pharmacy in the U.S. that hasn’t been influenced by him. It’s really true; the stuff that we take for granted — different bases, creams, work treatments — it’s George who really brought that to life. He knew stuff no one else did.”

Sue O’Neil is part of a “tight-knit and small” family of longtime Apothecary employees.

“Compounding was his niche, no doubt,” O’Neil says of Roentsch. “It’s what he loved to do; he never considered it work.”

It was not uncommon, she says, for Roentsch to spend all day working on a formula for a sick child, to try to get it just right. “To see that, to be a part of that, it’s why we have all worked there so long.”

Peter Weinert of Keene met Roentsch through his work in pharmaceutical sales and became a close friend, sharing regular conversation in Roentsch’s small, cramped office space. Weinert and others who knew Roentsch well said part of his charm was his shrewd sense of humor and the fact that he was given to perfect and completely unexpected moments.

Like the time, Weinert says, that Democratic presidential candidate George McGovern, stumping in the region, showed up unannounced at The Apothecary.

Keep in mind, Weinert says, “George was on the right side of politics. He says to McGovern: “Can I ask you one question? How does your plan differ from Ho Chi Minh’s for getting us out of Vietnam?”

“What did McGovern do? He walked out of the pharmacy.”

He often penned letters that were sometimes complimentary, sometimes critical.

Roentsch wrote Yankee owner George Steinbrenner regularly, and in a 1975 missive to then-baseball commissioner Bowie Kuhn, called for Kuhn's resignation. "Your actions and irresponsible utterings since becoming commissioner make 'Happy' Chandler seem like the reincarnation of King Solomon," he wrote.

"Not only was George a very intelligent person," Weinert says, "but he was fiery and he had strong opinions."

He was compassionate, too, meeting monthly with nurses at Cedarcrest to assess and find prescription solutions for its residents — children with disabilities.

"His mind was always working to improve their quality of life," says Peg Knox, the center's director of nursing. "He'd listen to what you had to say and his mind just went to work. He wasn't just a pharmacist; he came up with ideas that worked for the children and that were cost-effective."

In his spare time, Roentsch was father to three children, sat on the City Council and the zoning board, and presided over the N.H. Pharmaceutical Association as president. He was a pilot, built model airplanes and appraised antique radios. He was married to his first wife, Rae, the mother of their children, for 35 years. She died of Alzheimer's. He married his second wife, Mary, 24 years ago.

Mary is part of The Apothecary staff, as is Susie Harris, who came aboard in 1995 to become The Apothecary's third full-time pharmacist.

"When I came," Harris says, "I think George was able to do more of what he so loved, which is research and networking. It's how he came up with his compounds.

"His mind was incredible, but he always sought the simple answer. In George's mind, if he wasn't helping people, then why bother."

Which explains the overhead sign that Roentsch nailed to a wall behind the pharmacy counter years ago, visible not to customers but to staff.

His words:

“95 percent of people who come through the front door are my personal friends ... nobody knows the 5 percent that aren’t but me. Therefore, treat all of them as if they were the 95 percent.”

The point was simple, Harris says. “You have to realize that the people who come in here are sick and should be treated with respect.”

“He was one of a kind,” Weinert says of Roentsch.

Better than that, Rochefort, says.

“He’s a superstar. They should name a bridge for him.”

Paul Miller is managing editor of The Sentinel.