

Dr. Walter Bortz II

Doctor explores real human potential

by Sue Dremann

Dr. Walter Bortz II sat in his Portola Valley living room surrounded by the accoutrements of a successful career: Persian rugs, a fabulous hilltop view of the San Francisco Bay and various collectibles acquired from years of traveling to the far corners of the world. He can rattle off an impressive list of luminaries with whom he has had relationships: Linus Pauling, Mother Teresa and John Gardner, to name a few.

Wealth, fame and penning a series of successful books didn't top his list of memorable experiences. Instead, the best — so far — has come from a humble place.

It was 1958, a time of polarizing racial segregation, and each day Bortz saw the medical and social inequities of the poor.

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— Walter Bortz II

“The happiest year of my life was in residency at the Charity Hospital in New Orleans. It was like a MASH unit. ... People lived and died by whether you came to work. It was an instantly meaningful experience on the battle lines,” he recalled.

Bortz has practiced on both sides of the medical frontier, from spooning gruel into the mouths of the dying in India, to doing esoteric medical research at U.C. San Francisco. He has spent a good chunk of his life exploring human potential. For decades, he has been on the forefront of the science of healthful medicine and healthful aging, dispelling the notion that growing old means being frail.

Bortz's father had started the American Geriatric Society. As a youngster, he was surrounded by some of the greatest minds on aging. One of his earliest influences was the renowned educator Ethel Percy Andrus, founder of the American Association of Re-

tired Persons (AARP), he said.

An expert in obesity and trained as a microbiologist, he was recruited by Palo Alto Medical Foundation's founder Dr. Russel Lee to work with geriatric patients in 1972. The offer came at a critical time. Bortz was then grieving the death of his father, he said.

“The theme of my professional career is my opportunity as a caring steward of the end of thousands of lives. The final step before Roller & Hapgood, you go to see Bortz,” he said.

Years of attending to the dying convinced him there are better ways to age.

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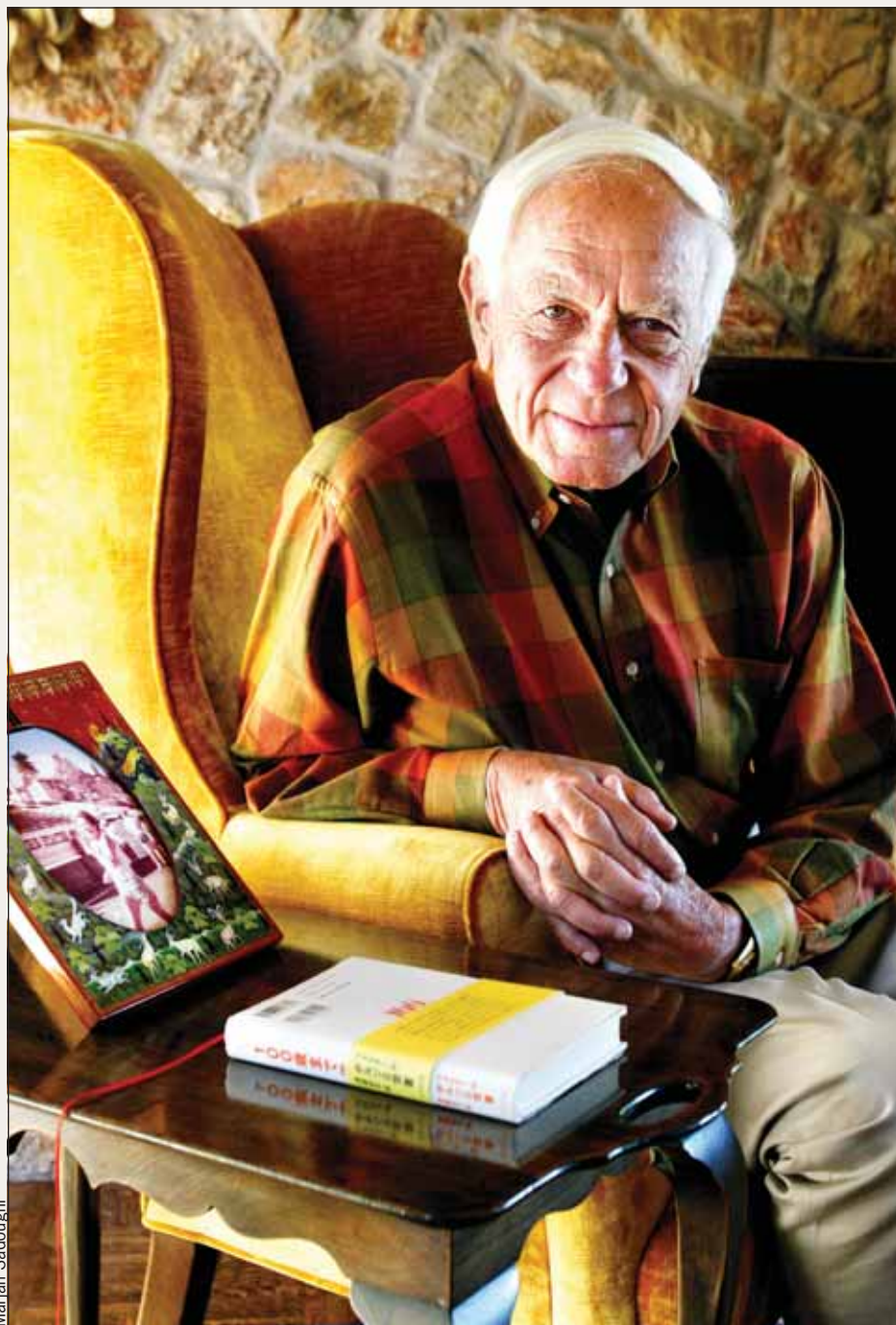
Bortz set out to find the “true, full, human potential,” which is about 100 years of age, he said. He has become a best-selling author of books such as “We Live Too Short and Die Too Long,” “Dare To Be 100,” “Living Longer for Dummies” and “Diabetes Danger.”

A Stanford University School of Medicine Clinical Associate Professor of Medicine, Bortz has written more than 130 medical articles. He has also helped establish and shape many resources for healthy aging for Midpeninsula seniors.

As chairman and president of the Palo Alto Task Force on Aging, he recommended founding Avenidas. He is board chairman of Fifty-Plus Life Long Fitness and senior advisor to Healthy Silicon Valley. He is past vice-president of the Senior Coordinating Council, past co-chair of the American Medical Association's Task Force on Aging and former president of the American Geriatric Society. Among his proudest achievements is his work with the East Palo Alto Senior Center, where he was board president from 1991 to 1992, he said.

Bortz has four adult children with his wife, Ruth Anne, and nine grandchildren. At 77, he still runs 16 miles per week and has completed 35 marathons. Just because he's aging, doesn't mean he's about to slow down any time soon, he said.

“The journey so far has been splendid, but it still has many miles to go,” he said, adding



With lifelong goals of living long and living well, Dr. Walter Bortz II still runs 16 miles a week at age 77.

a quote borrowed from a friend to sum up his philosophy:

“Keep your foot lashed to the pedal. No

braking allowed.”■

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Morrissey and Compton

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ter's highlights, they say.

A blend of a challenging curriculum and plenty of play, the 65 attendees gain skills for school, self-esteem boosts and new friends, they said.

“It's a really fun school,” Morrissey said.

Lance Armstrong even donated yellow jerseys to recognize achievements in the “Tour de Challenge,” Morrissey said.

Both Morrissey and Compton knew from a young age they wanted to teach.

When she moved to California from Nebraska, Morrissey decided she wanted to teach in Palo Alto, which she described as a “nice place.” And she wanted to teach third grade.

Instead, she was offered a chance to work with students with learning disabilities.

So, with hopes of eventually getting a third-grade class, Morrissey said “yes” to the job that became her career.

Growing up in Ohio, intrigued by stories of blind children, Compton always wanted to teach the handicapped, she said. She, too, came to Palo Alto, where she helped launch

its special-education program in 1964.

At the time, some people believed that children with learning disabilities couldn't be educated, and techniques for teaching them weren't well-developed, Compton said.

Eventually, Morrissey moved to head up a special-education program in Menlo Park and Compton joined the Children's Health Council. Both earned doctorates in education — Morrissey attended the University of San Francisco and Compton graduated from Stanford University.

And along the way they spent summers in Alaska for several years, teaching rural teachers how to accommodate children with learning disabilities.

Following Proposition 13, budget cuts to special-ed programs left many children with less severe disabilities without services, Morrissey said. She was also frustrated by the bureaucracy of administration and missed working directly with children.

“I decided that's not what I wanted to be,” Morrissey said.

So she decided to start a nonprofit to help children succeed in the public schools.

“I saw kids who were discouraged, a second-grader who asked if any job in life

doesn't require reading,” Morrissey said.

She wanted to charge parents who could pay but not deny service based on income level. Leaving a stable position for an unsure future was quite a risk, Compton said.

Nonetheless, Morrissey pursued her vision. She remembers her first effort to raise funds brought in only one \$45 check from a teacher that they used to buy a paper cutter.

But finally, the center's client base built up and moved into its current Park Boulevard office space. Until leaving the health council in 1997, Compton worked with Morrissey only part-time.

The center also helps adults with a disability who are struggling in their jobs or schools.

After more than 40 years in the area, Compton said the duo is well-known.

“This is a community where people really care about their children,” she said.

Compton attributes her success to her faith in children and patience with their parents.

When the parents relax, the children relax and have more success, she said.

They have been working for several years with foster children and youths in the juvenile justice system to pinpoint underlying

learning disabilities, efforts that won them the Legal Advocates for Children and Youth honor from the Silicon Valley Law Foundation in 2005.

“The biggest advantage for a child with learning disabilities is a parent who is a strong advocate,” Compton said. When left without that, problems caused by the disability are often exacerbated, she said.

The center now has a director, John Brentar, and the duo is supposed to “gradually fade out,” Morrissey said.

They laugh when asked about retirement — it's a question they face almost daily.

Sometimes, they ask each other, “What could we be doing that's more fun than what we are doing?” Compton said.

They can't think of anything, so they spend most all their time at the center.

They do travel occasionally, however, with Tuscany a favorite destination.

Compton has been teaching for 50 years and Morrissey is approaching that record.

Their winning philosophy? “All kids, all people deserve respect. They have good ideas,” Morrissey said. ■

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