Obituary: John Phillip Nelson MD (1936–2013)

David B. Levine MD

Received: 19 February 2014 / Accepted: 25 February 2014 / Published online: 27 March 2014
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A dedicated member of the Association of Bone and Joint Surgeons® for more than 35 years, John Phillip Nelson MD (Fig. 1) passed away at his home in Scottsdale, AZ, USA on November 28, 2013 after a brief battle with a virulent cancer of his spine. He was 1 month short of his 77th birthday.

A pioneer in clean-air operating environment, “Phil”, as he was known by his family, friends, and associates, wore many hats. Not only was he an accomplished surgeon, highly respected by his patients, colleagues, and students, but he was also regarded as a true scientific investigator whose unique knowledge of prevention of surgical infections was sought after by experts in the then-developing field of total joint replacement. Nelson was the lead author on the paper, *Clean Room Operating Rooms. A Review of Surgical Applications and Our Experiences*, his first study published in *Clinical Orthopaedics and Related Research*® in 1973. He was an invited instructor in more than 20 American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons Instructional Courses. In addition, Phil participated in more than 40 postgraduate continuing education courses on

reconstruction joint surgery, prevention of operative infection, and design of horizontal flow clean operating rooms. Whenever meeting with students or his peers in the profession to discuss a medical subject, Phil had a special knack of talking with you and not to you.

But the other Phil, at home on his ranch, was revealed by his daughter, Wendy.

“When at home, Phil traded surgical masks and scrubs for jeans and tattered shirts (the older and softer, the better), not to mention well-worn work gloves and an old western hat,” Wendy wrote via email. “Ranchers at heart, Phil and his wife, Charleen, managed a major quarter horse

Fig. 1 An accomplished surgeon, Dr. Nelson was also regarded as a true scientific investigator whose knowledge of prevention of surgical infections was sought after by experts in the total joint replacement field.

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D. B. Levine (✉)
Hospital for Special Surgery, 535 East 70th Street, New York,
NY 10021, USA
e-mail: levinedb@hss.edu

Fig. 2 Although he did not ride horses, Dr. Nelson greatly enjoyed their company.

training and breeding farm while in Colorado. Phil didn't ride horses, but he greatly enjoyed their company. Likewise, he relished the ranch life of driving tractors, tending gardens, mending fence and raking leaves."

Phil was predeceased by his wife in 1998 after 35 years of marriage.

Born in Red Oak, IA, USA, Phil grew up in Fremont, NE, USA where he was exposed to the outdoor life that led

him on a path of hunting, fishing, and raising animals whenever time permitted. He was awarded a MD degree from Northwestern University after attending Grinnell College. In 1969, Phil completed his orthopaedic residency at the Mayo Clinic, and settled into an orthopaedic practice in Denver, CO, USA for the next 20 years.

As his daughter Wendy wrote, "Serendipity" was Phil's favorite word — an expression of finding special or agreeable things when those things were not specifically sought after. His first bit of serendipity was meeting Charleen, his future wife, on an elevator at Northwestern University. Another serendipitous moment was later, when Wendy won a pony in a raffle at the age of 7, which ultimately led to a life of ranching for the Nelsons.

Phil is survived by his four children — his son Christopher (wife Nancy and five grandchildren, Andrew, Bradley, Caroline, Michael, and Faith); daughter Wendy (husband Scot Claus and grandson Spencer); son Drew (wife Sharon and granddaughters Kaylee and Meghan); and son Joel. He also is survived by his brother, Dr. Paul Nelson of Omaha, NE, USA. Phil was predeceased by another brother, Mark Nelson.

Phil also left behind some special friends including his cats, Milo and Chloe; his Rhode Island Red chicken, Big Red, and his beloved 33-year-old quarter horse mare, Brandy (Fig. 2).