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Shooting STAR

Rik Pokriefka's life burned bright and fast

by brad whitehouse

For Rik Pokriefka '84, the last day of his life was a lot like any other. The successful physician was just 40 years old; no one knew his life was about to end.

After a typically hectic day with patients, Rik met his family at their cottage in Sarnia, Ontario. He spent three hours on the phone that evening, discussing a difficult case with a colleague. He went to bed at 10 p.m. Just before 11:30 p.m., he suffered a massive heart attack.

Somehow, Rik's six children slept through the emergency sirens and commotion. Early the next morning, he was declared dead at the hospital.

The cause of the attack was dilated cardiomyopathy: an enlarged heart that doesn't pump well. Rik knew about the problem – a fellow student detected it way back in med school – and Rik had an appointment with a heart specialist just four days after he died. Unfortunately, he'd already put it off too long.

"I think he just worked himself too hard. I'm sure his body just got worn out," his wife Beth said. "I look back at it. In one day, he would do what most people do in two days."

Rik, who will be recognized posthumously with the Alumni Humanitarian Award at Homecoming, was an infectious disease doctor (called an ID for short). His job was to identify disease-causing bacteria or viruses and consult with doctors on how to treat them. Dr. Pokriefka was one of the best.

"He was certainly well-respected in the field," said Jodi Zych, a physician assistant who worked with Rik. "He got a lot of calls from doctors who'd ask him, 'What do you think I should do?' Everyone in infectious disease uses the same tools, the same basic drugs. But he could use them to get results when others couldn't."

"I don't think there was a better ID in this area," said Dr. Rajindar Sikand, a doctor of internal medicine who knew Rik for his whole career. "He was the type of guy who was very motivated, and a real go-getter."

Rik split his time between six hospitals in the Metro Detroit area. He was director of infectious disease and hospital epidemiology for St. John Health System. In addition, he had a private practice with three outpatient infusion clinics, in Sterling Heights, Westland and Hamtramck.

In other words, he was insanely busy. At any given moment, there were around ten things going on: patients in waiting rooms, IVs being administered, calls from doctors and nurses. He actually carried three cell phones, all different carriers, for better coverage.

“He was addicted to work. He wasn’t even addicted – he was just a doctor first, and everything fell into place after that,” Beth said. “I think you can only understand that if you’ve received the call to help people. That was what he was placed here on earth to do.”

The Healer

When Rik was a boy, he was always nursing something back to health.

“He knew he wanted to be a doctor from the time he was five years old,” said Mary Pokriefka, his mother. “Though we thought he might be a veterinarian, because he was so interested in animals and insects.”

“He was always taking his sick turtles to the vet,” Mary said. “At that time no vet had a clue what to do with a sick turtle.”

His compassion and interest in healing translated directly to his life as a doctor. People tell stories: There was the Christmas he bought a new TV set for one of his employees, a struggling single mom. Or the time Rik saved a patient’s life when he recognized a cardiac problem and rushed him off to get help in his own car. Or the HIV patient, distraught over losing his job and benefits, for whom Rik bought six months of drug treatment out of his own pocket.

He had high standards for patient care, and could be harsh when medical people made mistakes. But for him, it was all about keeping perspective.

“With him, patients were always the priority, no ifs, ands or buts,” said Debbie Opalewski, one of his veteran nurses. “I’ve been working for 30 years, and I’ve never found a boss as perfect as him.”

Rik was a dedicated family man with six children, including two from his first marriage to Dr. Eileen Pokriefka, and a daughter and three step-children with Beth. He tried to create a similar sense of family with his patients.

“Everything we did, we tried to make it feel like family,” said Beth, who ran the office end of the clinics. “So many patients told me that he made them feel like they were related to him, that they felt like he was there to take care of only them.”

His clinics were different. There was a free shuttle system to transport elderly patients. Cable TV and refreshments made IVs less of an ordeal. There were Christmas and birthday parties. Even patients who had been discharged would come back for the get-togethers.

When Rik was young, he was the only one in his family who would always talk to the Mormons who went door-to-door. He was good at connecting with people, and making them feel important.

“I’ve rarely seen a physician so loved by his patients,” Jodi said. “They gave him gift baskets, food, wine, vodka.”

Debbie understands why.

“He did everything he could to make patients comfortable,” Debbie said. “The word spread, and we went from 10 patients a day to over 60.”

Rik’s clinics were thriving, and he talked about plans to go national. He was spread thin and working hard, but things were going well.

“I thought Rik’s ability to intertwine business and medicine was incredible,” said Karen Tesorero, Rik’s P.R. and marketing person. “You don’t find many who can do both.”

His former patient Bob Cindrach agrees.

“It was a market that Rik was just absolutely overtaking, and today he would be king of the hill – no doubt about it,” Bob said. “He really built a practice based on personal touch.”

Bob speaks from experience. He relied on Rik’s counsel through a number of life-threatening health problems, including the amputation of his leg for diabetes-related issues.

“He told me I was either going to lose my leg or my life,” Bob said. “I’m not sure anyone else could have convinced me it was necessary, except Rik. I absolutely trusted him.”

Bob was also Rik’s close friend. Their families vacationed together, and they went to Red Wings games and Jimmy Buffet concerts together.

“The first time I met him was when friends introduced us at a concert, and I was really surprised when he walked up in a Megadeth T-shirt and jeans,” he said.

Rik was a sports fan. When Michigan State (his alma mater for med school) beat Michigan, he pestered Debbie, a U of M fan, by decking out the entire clinic in green and white.

“Ever since he died, on the Saturday those two teams play I go to the graveyard and put MSU carnations on one side of his grave, and U of M carnations on the other,” she said.

The Adrian years

In the spring of 1981, Contact ran a student profile on Rik. A top student in high school, he had several college choices,



Rik split his time between multiple hospitals, his three thriving clinics and his large family. Pictured here are (l-r) Rik, Jenna, Haley, his wife Beth and Brooke; back row, Ian, Rhiannan, Christian.

but chose Adrian after meeting the biology faculty at spring orientation.

"They were really interested in me – me, a lowly freshman," Rik said in the article. "I started talking about things I'm interested in, birds and salamanders and stuff, and immediately they were suggesting projects I could work on. They made it clear that if I wanted to work, I could get involved right away."

In typical fashion, he dove right in. He clicked with Craig Weatherby in the biology department, who was flabbergasted when Rik in his first year presented a paper on a spinal deformity in fish to a group of professionals, and later won first place at a national convention for a biology undergraduate honorary.

"That's unheard of," Weatherby said. "No one gives a talk in front of professionals in their first year."

"I couldn't do anything research-related in the four years he was here when he wasn't right there. I'd give him a chance with a project and off he'd go. And it always translated into quality work."

"I just have this insane wish to learn everything," Rik told Contact. "Sometimes I run myself into the ground. But I wouldn't push so hard at it if I weren't so excited by it all."

"His curiosity was the driving factor in everything," Mary Pokriefka said. "He wanted to know and understand."

Mary said that to Rik, the people at Adrian College were like family.

"He loved Adrian," Mary said. "He'd send me letters and cards about what a wonderful time he was having."

Rik's college roommate was **Dr. Cliff Matushin '84**, now a physician in South Dakota. Rik was Cliff's best man when he got married to **Robin Georgoff Matushin '84**. And when it came to Rik's appetite for pranks, Cliff was his partner in crime.

"I don't think there was any trouble he got in that I wasn't knee deep in, too," Cliff said.

Rik followed Professor Willard Craft to the bar and filled his VW Bug with popcorn. He put a chemical in the punch that made everyone wonder for days why their urine was pink. He superglued Cliff's underwear drawer shut, so he had to wear the same pair for a few days until he broke down and bought new. He slipped X-rated pictures into the chemistry professor's slide show, and he fixed the shower

heads so that it stained the football team purple.

"Whenever something happened, the dean would call Rik, even if he didn't have any proof it was him," Cliff said. "Rik irritated him. But it was one of those things where if you saw him alone, he was laughing his head off. I mean, who would think of staining the football team purple?"

Probably most frustrating for the dean was that Rik was a fantastic student who was hard not to like. When professors teased him he could give it right back, and he always helped other students catch on to the class work.

"He was the smartest person I ever met," Cliff said. "He would blow off 12 weeks of class, read the entire textbook the night before, go and get an 'A' the next day, and then remember it forever. And then the rest of the semester he'd play with frogs and snakes with Dr. Weatherby.

"No matter what happened to him, it was hilarious, and he'd fix it. It didn't matter if it was a flat tire in the rain on the way home from Toledo. He'd just say, 'Whatever,' without ever getting angry, and he'd just take care of it."

Unfortunately, his family says he had a similar stubborn independence when it came to dealing with his own health. Cliff said it this way:

"Rik thought he was bulletproof. He did so well because he was smart and lucky. He lived by the theory that 'I can do this, it won't affect me.' And 99 percent of the time he was right."

"I've rarely seen a physician so loved by his patients."



Pokriefka and Weatherby

In Honor of a Friend

Richard Pokriefka '84 will receive the Alumni Humanitarian Award posthumously at Homecoming on Oct. 15. In addition, Craig Weatherby, Adrian College biology chair, is starting a field research endowment for environmental science students in Rik's honor.

"Rik believed there was always a reason that things happened," Weatherby said. "When I think about how premature his death was, I can hear him reminding me of that. For the life of me, I don't know what it is yet, but it helps me deal with the loss."

Weatherby and Pokriefka were close friends for 22 years. They authored a book together on treating disease in amphibians and reptiles, in addition to writing papers and taking research trips to Africa and the Caribbean.

"The endowment will give students at Adrian experiences outside the classroom, to make discoveries, and experience the same excitement he had. It all revolves around trying to make more Rik Pokriefkas.

"Imagine if students could do research in any part of the world they wanted."

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