

Dr. Howard Willson is the WMS 2018 Physician of the Year

BY ELIZABETH SAMPSON
Wyoming Medical Society

Dr. Willson and his wife Belenda are pictured at the Jackson Hole Airport.

Being a successful doctor came down to two words for Dr. Howard Willson of Thermopolis—accessibility and caring. Willson, who is the 2018 Wyoming Medical Society Physician of the Year, often reiterated their importance to his wife Belenda.

“He always told me the secret to having a successful medical practice was to be accessible and to care about your patients—that’s the secret,” she said. “You can be the greatest doctor in the world and not care, or you can be the greatest doctor in the world and not be available.” Willson consistently made sure he took care of both.

Whether that meant always having his home phone number printed in the phone book or always being on call, Willson’s patients knew they could count on him when they needed him.

“He never took off his doctor hat,” Belenda said. “That’s what people loved about him. He was always there for them.”

Now aged 84 and no longer practicing medicine, Willson is proud of having been able to help so many people.

“I’ve been extremely satisfied with the outcome of my practice and the things that I’ve been able to do with it,” Willson said. “Each day was a challenge and was met as such.”

Willson, who retired in 2014, started his medical career with

a determined attitude that carried him from the sweltering football fields at the University of Florida football to the frigid hills of small-town Wyoming. His time as a physician came with plenty of firsts, including being one of the first physicians certified in family practice, overseeing the implementation of one of the first medical helicopter flights in Wyoming and even the advent of the use of Gatorade to help athletes recover from playing in the heat.

Born in Spring Lake, Fla. in 1934, Willson earned his undergraduate degree in science education from Florida State University. He was in the Reserved Officers’ Training Corps, so after graduation he went directly into the Air Force as a second lieutenant. After four years in the military, he moved his family to Gainesville, Fla., walked into the dean’s office at the University of Florida and told him he wanted to go to medical school. Despite having an undergraduate degree in education and lacking pre-requisite classes like organic chemistry, the dean decided to help him.

“The dean said, ‘I like your spirit, boy. I will help you all I can,’” Belenda said. He found a spot on the alternate list, and after several students dropped out, Willson was accepted into medical school that same year. He graduated in 1965, and



Dr. Willson earned the respect of many influential people in Wyoming, including Senator Mike Enzi (pictured), Senator John Barrasso and former Governor Freudenthal.

then rejoined the military, completing a rotating internship as a captain at the Andrews Air Force Base hospital during the Vietnam War.

He volunteered for the grim duty of meeting the troop plane that was filled with wounded military men who came every Thursday night from Da Nang. It was his job to triage the wounded and decide where they would go. Some were sent home. Some were sent to other hospitals. Some he knew would die. The flight from Da Nang took 72 hours, and though there were nurses on board, there were no doctors.

"They were just glad to see him," Belenda said. "He said it was the best thing, and the hardest thing, he ever did. He felt like he was doing something to help these people."

After completing his internship, he worked at the infirmary at the University of Florida where he served as the team doctor for the Florida Gators football team. During that time, one of his colleagues was developing the formula for what would become Gatorade, which was created to help athletes recover from losing electrolytes while playing in the extreme Florida heat. The cost of treating the athletes with the drink was \$350 per game, and their coach wasn't happy about the expense. Willson reminded the coach that the cost of having the players

spend the weekend after a game in the infirmary was more than the price of the Gatorade.

"He convinced the football coach to try it," Belenda said, adding that the first weekend they gave it to the players in its basic chemical form, and they spit it out. The next weekend they mixed it with grape juice, but when the players spilled it on their uniforms, the team managers weren't happy. Next they made it with a lemon-lime flavor, and the rest is Gatorade history.

Following his time with the Gators, Willson moved to south Florida and worked as a family practice physician for about ten years. He also ran an emergency room in Palm Beach.

Willson's Wyoming story begins in 1976 when he and his wife and children moved to Basin. Willson had spent three summers working in Glacier National Park during college, and that, combined with his love for the mountains sparked a desire to live in the West. The hospital between Greybull and Basin contacted him and asked him to come take a look around and consider working there. He had been at an emergency room conference in Las Vegas when they contacted him, so he and Belenda and their three-month old baby flew to Wyoming in a small plane the hospital sent for them.



Dr. Willson served residents of Basin, Greybull and Thermopolis throughout his years practicing in Wyoming. He said the secret of being a successful doctor was being available to and truly caring about his patients.

They returned to Florida once again after the conference, but the citizens of Wyoming weren't ready to let him get away, so they invited Willson to go elk hunting in the Big Horns. It worked.

"He just fell in love with that area in the Big Horn Basin," Belenda said. "The only problem was he had to convince the rest of us to move out." She knew it was his dream, so they moved to Basin in February. The couple drove to Wyoming with two dogs and four of their eventual six kids (one was already in the Army and one was yet to be born). They were in a Bronco pulling a trailer with a boat and a station wagon pulling an old Volkswagen.

"We looked like gypsy vagabonds coming out here," she said. They weren't certain what Wyoming would be like, but they knew they were nervous about the cold.

"We were moving to Wyoming in February from south Florida, and we all thought we were gonna freeze to death once we got there." They still braved the trip, but not before stopping at an Eddie Bauer store in Denver to buy everyone a down coat.

Their arrival in the Big Horns was the beginning of Willson's noticeable influence on rural medicine as well as medical care in Wyoming. The doctor in Basin whose practice they had moved to join left after six months. Other doctors came and went, but most de-

cided the tiny town wasn't for them.

"Howard was always on call in that period of time," Belenda said. "He did everything—delivered babies, did surgeries—everything."

When he arrived in Basin, the town ambulance was an old red station wagon and the local mortuary ran the ambulance service. Willson set to work training the EMTs so there would be a better ambulance service to work with. As part of his work improving emergency care in the Big Horn Basin, Willson worked to get one of Wyoming's first medical helicopter transport services up and running in the 1970s.

"One of the big problems was getting people transferred out to higher level of care," Belenda recalled. "They couldn't take care of a lot of things in Basin and Greybull." So Willson found a solution. He received a grant to help pay for a used Huey helicopter, and it was soon being used to transport seriously ill and injured patients.

"They flew it everywhere," Belenda said. "They picked up survivors from a plane wreck, and they took people who were in horrible burn situations to Salt Lake. It was quite impressive. Nobody could believe Basin and Greybull had one of the very first in the state of Wyoming."

In 1982 he moved his practice to Thermopolis so he could share the extreme workload with other doctors.

He was working himself to death," Belenda said. "His kids were bigger. We could never leave town." Even though he had moved, he still went back to Basin every week to see his patients and continued to do so almost as long as he practiced medicine.

Not only did Willson continue to make sure the people of the Big Horn Basin had quality medical care, he was also instrumental in ensuring all of Wyoming has access to qualified doctors and good medical care. He helped write the trauma plan for the state of Wyoming and was on the Governor's Advisory Committee on Emergency Medical Service. In addition, he was very involved with the Wyoming Medical Society throughout the years, serving in various roles on the board, including president.

Wendy Curran of Cheyenne worked with Willson extensively during her time as executive director of WMS. She said he was

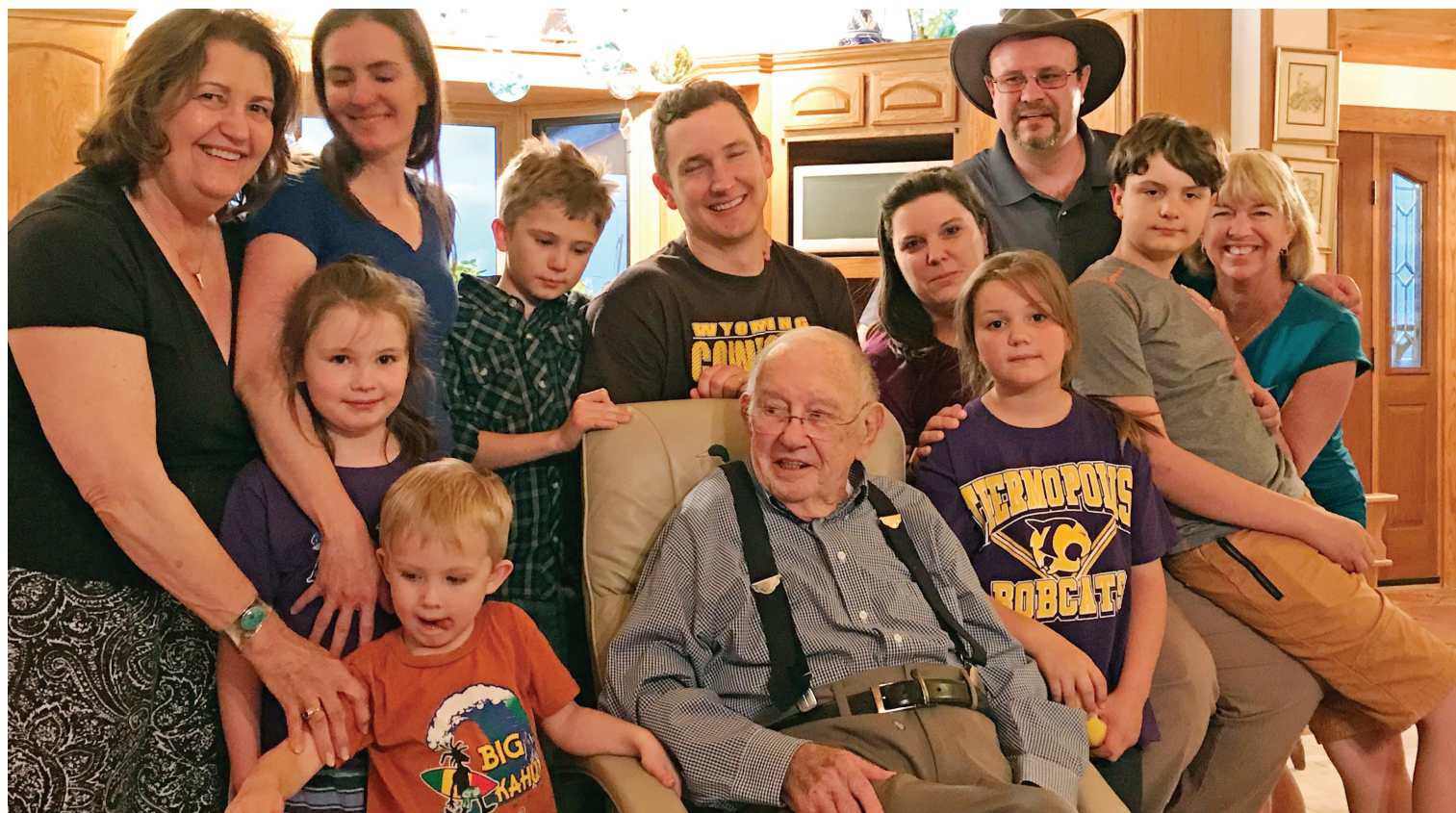
a great doctor who was compassionate and understanding while taking a personal interest in the lives of his patients.

"He really deeply cared about helping them feel better and get healthy," she said. Beyond his work as a doctor, she said she knew him most as a great leader for the WMS where he showed the same care for the medical profession as he did for his patients.

"He had great integrity and

"He never took off his doctor hat, that's what people loved about him. He was always there for them."

BELENDA WILLSON
Dr. Willson's Wife



Belenda Willson, far left, and Dr. Howard Willson, seated, are shown with members of their family.

honesty—and the same sort of compassion for the profession of medicine and making sure that the field of medicine was high quality,” Curran said. “He had great professional ethics both as a doctor and a leader.”

Dr. Larry Kirven, who nominated Willson for the Physician of the Year award, also first got to know Willson through WMS when he was a member of the board of trustees in the 1990s. Kirven is currently the assistant clinical dean of Wyoming WWAMI.

“Although Dr. Willson could be a bit gruff and outspoken, he understood the value of rural primary care,” Kirven said. “I nominated Dr. Willson as I felt he epitomized the characteristics of leadership that the Wyoming Medical Society is seeking to encourage among the current members. Dr. Willson was a leader in WMS as well as his community. He was also an advocate for rural primary care and was one of the leaders in advocating for Wyoming joining the WWAMI program, which I think was a major step in getting Wyoming students to return to Wyoming after completing their medical education.”

Willson served as chairman of the first admissions committee for WWAMI—a medical education program affiliated with the University of Washington School of Medicine that trains medical doctors from Wyoming, Washington, Alaska, Montana and Idaho at their home universities, in Seattle as well as in clinical settings throughout the WWAMI region.

He worked with WMS and the state legislature to ensure that practicing physicians had a say in which candidates were cho-

sen for Wyoming’s WWAMI students. They looked for students who wanted to come back and practice in Wyoming.

“He loved that part of his practice,” Belenda said. “He worked with three or four students with the WWAMI program. Some stayed and lived with us in Thermopolis.”

Willson also worked to make sure the medical profession as a whole was taken care of and safeguarded. He served as a delegate and an alternate to the American Medical Association, an organization he is still a member of. His wife said he believed the AMA was the only voice physicians had.

“One person doesn’t have a voice, but the collective group does have a voice in Washington as a patient advocate and also for their profession,” Belenda explained.

His list of accomplishments and volunteer service could fill a book. From being chief of staff at both Big Horn County Hospital and Hot Springs County Memorial Hospital to being the medical director of a chronic pain management program at Gottsche Rehab Center and working for Mountain-Pacific Quality Health Foundation, Willson’s life is a testament to his belief in helping others.

Many people around the state have their own Dr. Willson stories, but the underlying theme is that he was a great doctor who put his patients first. His wife may have summed it up best.

“I always knew when it was said and done that his patients always came first no matter what,” Belenda said. “I didn’t resent it because that was who he was. I wouldn’t have wanted him any other way. He couldn’t have been any other way.” 