

A Tribute to Claude Organ, MD, From the Association of Women Surgeons

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The mission of the Association of Women Surgeons is “to inspire, encourage and enable women surgeons to realize their personal and professional goals.”¹ Claude Organ personified this mission statement not only for women surgeons but for all surgeons. To him, surgeons were surgeons, no matter their packaging. He was noted for providing that needed push or pull, especially to those who for reasons of race, sex, or socioeconomic status were not able to make it over the hurdles on their own. He understood that for many, a small intervention was all that was needed to put them on the path to greatness.

In 1993, Dr Organ was awarded the Nina Starr Braunwald Award from the Association of Women Surgeons. The award was established by Nina’s husband to memorialize her ideals. The award is “given to a member or non-member surgeon in recognition of outstanding contribu-

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tions to the advancement of women in surgery.”¹ Dr Organ’s support of women surgeons was longstanding and widespread. He supported women surgeons in all areas of his work: in his role as a department chair and in his role as a leader of American surgery. Dr Organ saw these positions as an opportunity to serve those around him: younger surgeons, patients, and the community.

During the last months of his life, Dr Organ led a contingent of American surgeons to South Africa. Dr Denise Johnson remembers that even though this trip was clearly difficult for him physically, he had a smile on his face continuously (oral communication, August 2005). It was his gift to South Africa; he was ensuring that the foundation was solid for the work yet to be done. More importantly, it was a gift to the surgeons who participated: not only a gift of his time, but also a chance to show them the needs of people outside our country.

As we mark his passing, we should remember and emulate what Dr Organ brought to our profession. We can use 3 words to describe his life and work: honor, re-

spect, and passion. Dr Organ embodied these 3 ideals. He brought and showed honor for the profession. He was respectful of people despite their differences. And he was passionate about many things, but first and foremost about surgery and the benefits it brings all people.

The Nina Starr Braunwald Award, although specifically designated for someone who has contributed to the advancement of women in surgery, is for Dr Organ a symbol of his honor, respect, and passion for all those who choose to pursue and promote surgery as a career. It is with great sadness that we commemorate his passing, but with great honor, respect, and passion that we celebrate his life.

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REFERENCE

1. Association of Women Surgeons Web site. Available at: <http://www.womensurgeons.org>. Accessed on August 21, 2005.

Claude Organ, a Legend of Advocacy

Patricia J. Numann, MD

Claude Organ was the conscience of American surgery with regards to is-

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sues of black surgeons and also women surgeons. I came to understand Claude’s passion for raising these issues when he was writing *A Century of Black Surgeons*. He called me one day and asked whether I knew any black women surgeons: a strange question coming from him,

I thought. He explained that he was writing this book, that he believed it important to point out the valued contributions of black surgeons despite their small number, and that he realized (because, as he acknowledged, his administrative assistant had pointed it out to him) he hadn’t

included any women. I told him that of course I knew black women surgeons. We discussed several, all of whom he did know, and discussed the need to remind people of the importance of inclusion.

Claude and I got to know each other well and could always count on one another for support. More than almost anyone I know, he understood the need to recognize those in the minority and advocate for their recognition so others in the minority would be encouraged to pursue their dreams. In subtle, small ways, and sometimes large, very visible ways, he always reminded everyone of our lack of understanding of racial issues. His presentation on the unreliability of our data on

prevalence, risk factors, and treatment differences in disease based on racial differences was but 1 example of how he made us aware.

Last year following an American College of Surgeons chapter meeting in Cooperstown, NY, I sat with Claude in the rocking chairs on the porch of the Otesaga Inn discussing the progress that black people and women had made in surgery and the challenges still to be met. He shared with me that there would be a woman president of the American College of Surgeons. He said I would be pleased (I was). We celebrated that just as we had celebrated the first black president. With that sly smile of his, he leaned over and reminded me that the first

African American president was white! He preferred the term *black* to describe his race. We laughed.

That celebration and the joy Claude took in these successes will be my lasting memory of Claude. Bringing women and black surgeons into roles of prominence is an incredible gift Claude made to American surgery and a forever tribute to his greatness.

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I Promise to Be the Best Surgeon

Remembering Claude H. Organ, Jr

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Ironically, Dr Claude Organ passed away only hours prior to our 18th annual department dinner, a tradition started by Dr Organ to celebrate the graduation of his chief residents and to welcome the incoming residents. It was with laughter and tears that we as his trainees remembered him that night. Those of us who were fortunate to train in his program knew from the start that the man was a legend; after all, he was the reason most of us chose the residency program. Dr Organ had been an icon for generations of young surgeons, with countless editorial positions and invited lectureships around the world. Many of us

had sat in his office in silent amazement as he casually answered phone call after phone call from world leaders of surgery (many of whom we knew of only from textbook titles and meetings) as they unceremoniously made the big decisions, exchanged jokes, and selected fellows and junior faculty. When with Dr Organ, the icon of American surgery, we felt like small pawns in the chess game of surgery. We also felt very privileged to have a master of surgery as our chairman.

Despite all of his accomplishments, Dr Organ would repeatedly tell us that his legacy would not be the book chapters, articles, leadership positions, or named lectures. This puzzled us, for we knew, as most do, about the 300 plus scientific articles he authored, the barriers he broke, and the organizations he served, including his position as President of the American College of Surgeons. His legacy, he said, was us—the residents he trained. In fact, he wanted his presidency to be re-

membered as the “Year of the Resident.” From Dr Organ, we learned to accept nothing less than excellence, in the way we spoke, behaved, and most importantly, treated our fellow human beings.

Dr Organ taught us from our first day as interns how to speak as surgeons, an art in itself. Each and every morning at 7 AM, our chairman met the residents for “morning report.” Though morning report started at 7 AM, he was quick to remind us that “on time” meant we were there at 6:55 AM, sitting, and quietly prepared. He was always in coat and tie and we always had our white coats buttoned up. At morning report, the resident presented every single patient evaluated by the surgical service the previous day. This included trauma patients, consultations, and emergency department referrals. Occasionally there might be coffee or food offered, but he would remind us “cogitate, do not masticate.” Scholarly thought was what Dr Organ appreciated most.

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