

THE EDITOR'S CORNER

One of a Kind

Sometimes it's important to remember that when we lose treasured friends, we're not really losing them at all. Memories live on, lessons persist, and legacies endure. Great ones connect our very roots to the future and meld all that was with all that can be. Such a person was Robert Murray Ricketts. No more poignant story can be told than about the life of this extraordinary man. At a time when controversial figures have essentially ceased to exist in our profession, let it be known that he was the quintessential controversial figure. Bold, brazen, arrogant, provocative, and incisive at times. Warm, loving, and nurturing at others. He has been called a Renaissance man. But he was more than that. His passion for life simply transcended his knowledge about *things*. Bob Ricketts always understood that the world is a strange and mysterious place and that our quest in life is to understand it a bit more completely.

He was a prolific writer and lecturer. In one year alone he accounted for 12 watershed articles in major journals; his tomes on cephalometrics, growth, and mechanics have become standards for many of today's aspiring orthodontists. His two-week in-office course was almost a rite of passage for orthodontists in the '70s and '80s. Seasoned professionals were known to quake in their boots at the thought of being called to the chalkboard to draw the precise anatomy of the temporal or frontal bone. Thankfully, I got the nasal bone. In his marathon lectures, Rick taught by stripping people down to the core and then rebuilding them again in his own likeness. You thought you knew something and he proved you didn't. It became the stuff of true believers.

Rick loved to regale his passionate followers with stories of Angle, Brodie, Tweed, Steiner, and others that he knew, admired, and generally disagreed with. He captured the imagination of most all who came within his sphere. He carried a sweet tune, and was often heard crooning "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling" at the back of the bus just to keep all eyes on him. A bit of theatricality wasn't entirely beyond Bob Ricketts.

In fact, this man always knew how to create a stir. It was not unusual to see him in a cramped waiting room at the end of a busy day running a vacuum cleaner, calling for the impatient hordes to lift their feet so he could “get us all out of here on time”. I’m certain there were a great many dinner-table conversations about the humility of the great Dr. Ricketts and his not being too pretentious to do simple tasks. There were no small chores, only small people.

Rick was an incredibly perceptive man. I once saw him walk up to a young boy who was seated in the operatory wearing a headgear. He placed his hand over the child’s heart and quietly asked him how much he was wearing the headgear. “Every night”, the child replied with assurance. Confused, I later asked Rick why he did such a thing. He replied with a grin: “When I asked him if he was wearing his headgear, his heartbeat zoomed. He isn’t wearing it.” Part man, part lie detector.

Whenever I saw Rick he seemed ebullient. He knew that we made choices every morning about how our day was going to proceed. But just once, I remember passing him in a crosswalk at an AAO meeting and expressing concern about a divorce he had just gone through. He said, “Jimmy, it’s been really tough”, and when we hugged each other he started to cry. I thought how ironic it was that this passionate and romantic man had succumbed to kryptonite just like the

rest of us mortals. I couldn’t help but cry myself.

His almost complete disregard for economic matters put some stress in his life, a stress most of his friends thought should never exist. Some felt he used the profession in a self-serving way. But to them I would suggest that his love for orthodontics was so innocent and complete that it almost never occurred to him that his efforts could mean financial gain. His obsession for looking around corners far outweighed his need to make a buck. His passion for orthodontics demanded that you never just torqued a wire—you torqued the bejeezus out of it.

It is impossible to lionize any icon without admitting that he had his detractors. Many an orthodontist was seen leaving Rick’s lecture hall in a hissy fit of expletives. His story is replete with instances of cynics in the audience shouting at him and his shouting back. Many disagreed with him, but nearly all listened with rapt attention. Looking back, it was a lot of fun and always had that dash of competitive zeal. That doesn’t happen too much any more.

Dr. Robert Murray Ricketts piqued the interest of an entire generation of orthodontists in a most alluring way. His hearty laugh, his wicked sense of humor, his joy of life, and his profound insights will be missed by all who knew him. He was, quite simply, one of a kind.

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