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Alumni Profile

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Advancing neurosurgery by building strong relationships



Donna and John '67 Frazee

John Frazee '67 understands the value of relationships.

Whether it's as part of a team in the operating room performing delicate brain surgery or in the classroom mentoring students at the UCLA Medical Center, Frazee has become a world-renowned neurosurgeon by developing strong ties with his students and colleagues.

Frazee helped lead the team that in 2002 successfully separated Guatemalan twins who were joined at the head. One reason the procedure was successful is because the physicians performing the surgery were a team with a shared history in the operating room. Amid the high-tech monitors, precision tools and staff with world-class credentials, the exhausting 22-hour surgery became a lesson in the value of strong relationships.

In the classroom, Frazee, a professor of surgery at UCLA, nurtures the professional development of his residents and students. When they finally launch their private practices, Frazee invites them to his home for a celebratory dinner. Students reciprocate by sharing news about their families and consulting with him about challenging cases.

He maintains ties with Linfield as well. Last fall he returned to attend the annual Frazee Lecture, established in honor of his father, the late Gordon G. Frazee, former professor of religion. He visited several classes, impressing both students and faculty.

"He has a passion for inspiring students to achieve and pursue professional training," said Lee Bakner, professor of psychology.

The theme of this year's Frazee Lecture and Pollard Symposium, "Why God Won't Go Away: A Dialogue Between Neuroscience and Theology," is one that Frazee encounters on a regular basis.

"Spirituality arises every day when I'm interacting with patients. It shapes the ethics of our discipline."

— John Frazee '67

"Spirituality arises every day when I'm interacting with patients," he said. "It shapes the ethics of our discipline."

Frazee explored other paths before discovering his aptitude for neurosurgery. After graduating from Linfield, he pursued graduate studies at Berkeley until he was drafted during the Vietnam War. As a conscientious objector, he was assigned to work at Good Samaritan Hospital in Portland, where a brain surgeon invited him to observe an operation. Spurred by the opportunity and his mentor's interest, Frazee enrolled in

pre-med courses.

"I didn't believe I was bright enough to be a doctor," he recalled. "Each of us needs a mentor who will help us find the spot that fits us well."

Although medicine is his passion, his strong liberal arts education allows him to engage in discussions ranging through a wide array of disciplines. He admits his background is unusual for a neurosurgeon, and says that despite his 120-hour work weeks, he reads widely in his spare time, most recently a history of the great generals.

When asked to name the predictable characteristics of top neurosurgeons, he listed them rapidly: physical dexterity; a keen sense of spatial awareness needed for forays into the 3-D architecture of the brain; passion; compassion; the ability to make decisions; and an unflappable combination of humility and confidence while performing high-stakes operations.

Twice a year, Frazee gathers eight individuals from among his top peers in the world. Their objective is to persuade fellow neurosurgeons to adopt a new procedure that uses sophisticated instruments to perform brain surgery through a dime-size opening in the skull - a less invasive and safer technique. With his colleagues, Frazee hopes to revolutionize approaches to neurosurgical protocols, education and insurance practices worldwide.

Frazee is a persuasive advocate for the power of mentoring relationships and collaborations that serve a larger mission.

"We have a responsibility to use our talents," he said. "At Linfield, I learned that our role is to give back to the community. To keep something that's important to us, we have to give it away."

— Jodi Kilcup