

## Dr. James Neff, World-Class Pioneering Surgeon, Remembered

“a giant in his field” • “a true leader” • “an innovator”



James Russell Neff, MD, internationally recognized orthopaedic surgeon and faculty member for the University of Nebraska Medical Center, Department of Orthopaedic Surgery, died July 12, 2005, at the age of sixty-five after an extended battle with cancer.

James (Jim) Neff was born in Beloit, Kansas, in 1940 but spent his childhood years in Topeka, Kansas, attending public school there until graduating from high school in 1958. He received his undergraduate degree from Kansas State University in 1962, and went on to receive his medical degree from the University of Kansas College of Medicine in 1966. Jim spent the years of 1966 – 1968 at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, completing an internship in Surgery, followed by a residency in General Surgery.

Jim’s training was interrupted by the call of duty and he spent a year aboard the USS George Marshall as a Lieutenant Commander. Following a year at sea, he was stationed at the United States Naval Submarine base in Groton, Connecticut, as an orthopaedic surgeon.

His duty honored, Jim resumed his training in Michigan, completing his orthopaedic residency in 1973, followed by a fellowship in Musculoskeletal Pathology at the University of Florida. It was here that he was exposed to novel limb sparing procedures for patients afflicted with osseous and soft tissue malignancies. He was a gifted orthopaedic surgeon upon arrival and by the completion of his fellowship a consummate tumor surgeon. In due course, he would make his mark as an innovative surgeon on the regional, national and international scene.

Jim left the University of Florida a much richer institution for his contributions and returned to the University of Kansas in 1975, where he pioneered the development of an outstanding program of patient care, education and research. He was later appointed professor of surgery at the University of Kansas, and in 1991 he joined the University of Nebraska Medical Center as professor and chairman of the Department of Orthopaedic Surgery and Rehabilitation.

“He was really brilliant – probably the best surgeon to come through Nebraska in any field,” said Dr. Walter Hurman, professor of Orthopaedic Surgery and a colleague of Jim’s for 14 years. Dr. Hurman was also very impressed with how Jim looked after and nurtured the resident orthopaedic surgeons under his charge.

“Jim always took the time to learn as much about the residents as he could,” he said. “When the residents left, they took with them Jim’s concern for his patients as well as great admiration for his abilities.”

Residents recall him with great admiration and almost a sense of awe. “He had a great ‘presence’ about him,” said Dr. Craig Mahoney (2001). “Not a sense of ‘intimidation,’ but rather a sense that he was a ‘fatherly figure’ in the department.”

Dr. Brian Brigman (2000) remembers Jim encouraging him when others gave little consideration to his choice to pursue a PhD during his residency. This inspiring trait was a constant in all facets of Jim’s life.

“His patience, ingenuity and willingness to take on, with aplomb, the most demanding of cases in the most despairing and deserving of patients inspired me,” said Dr. Brigman. “His composure, humbleness, and serenity with himself and everyone around him as he continued his demanding work

through chemotherapy treatments, despite the physical pain and frailty he developed (certainly for the first time in his life) without complaint or explanation was awe inspiring. He gave me a model to comport myself for the rest of my life. I will miss him dearly.”

A specialist in treating cancer of the bone and soft tissues, Jim was known around the world for performing innovative procedures to help people lead a more normal life following cancer. Two such procedures were the rotationplasty and the hemipelvectomy. Jim developed a custom hemipelvis and modular implant system to be used during a hemipelvectomy that could be adjusted in the operating room to fit the patient’s precise needs.

Jim was an innovator who was always thinking, always tinkering with new ideas. He created a workshop in his basement to test out his ideas and invented a knee fusion device used for patients with failed knee surgeries. This device, created nearly 25 years ago, is known as the “Neff Nail” and continues to be frequently used by orthopaedic surgeons today.

Jim’s presence at University of Nebraska Medical Center was evident far beyond the realm of orthopaedics, impacting the departments of Radiology, Oncology, Radiation Oncology, Pediatrics, Pathology, Genetics and Physical Therapy. The orthopaedic residency program was revolutionized by the vast amount of knowledge that Jim contributed in all of these areas, expanding their education and training far beyond orthopaedics.

Jim’s resume was laden with accomplishments and honors. He published over 150 articles in scientific journals and authored 14 books or book chapters. He gave 149 presentations at local, national and international scientific meetings.

Over the years Jim was active in many national and international leadership roles, was a member of countless organizations, and served on dozens of boards and committees. For nearly two decades he served as an examiner for the American Board of Orthopaedic Surgery, and for twenty-five years was an associate editor for *Clinical Orthopaedics and Related Research*. In addition, Jim played an enabling role in the establishment of the North American Musculoskeletal Tumor Society and the International Society of Limb Salvage, known as a group of premier thinkers and visionaries. Just recently, he was selected to receive the University of Kansas Distinguished Medical Alumni Award.

Both colleagues and patients, including children, often praised Jim’s compassionate demeanor. Patients described him as “caring and courageous,” “calm and compassionate” and a “gifted healer.” Hundreds of patients thanked Jim’s family for allowing him to share his time and devotion with so many patients that desperately needed his healing hands.

Since his passing patients, operating room personnel, nurses, support staff and colleagues have offered their feelings of respect, affection and reverence for Jim, both personally and professionally. The medical community has lost an intellect; his patients have sustained the departure of a trusted friend and healer; his students are bereft of their mentor; colleagues will miss his counsel; and friends are left with memories.

Jim is survived by his wife, Julia Bridge, M.D., Professor, University of Nebraska Medical Center Pathology and Microbiology; daughters, Rachael and Kirsten; son, Gregory; and stepson, Stuart.

At a memorial service on August 6th at the Dundee Presbyterian Church in Omaha, Nebraska, many people gathered to pay their respects to a surgeon, a colleague, a husband, a father, and a friend. In a heartfelt statement written by Jim prior to his death, he stated, “I have so many people to thank for my rich and eventful life – patients, colleagues, friends and family. . . I bid you farewell as I assume the role in my next challenge. I implore you to make the most of life. . .”

On October 5th, 2005, there was a burial service with full military honors for Dr. James Russell Neff at Arlington National Cemetery, in Arlington, Virginia.

To honor his many contributions, we are establishing the James R. Neff Endowed Chair at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, Department of Orthopaedic Surgery and Rehabilitation, so that those who come after this phenomenal individual may be as inspired by him as those of us who were able to experience him in life. If you are interested in making a donation, or would like more information regarding this endowment, please contact the University of Nebraska Foundation’s Omaha office at 8712 West Dodge Street, Suite 100, Omaha, NE 68114. Or you may call them at (402) 595-2302.