



## Walter Owens

February 4, 1926 - October 25, 2009

Walter L. Owens, M.D., 83

Walter Lee Owens, 83, died Sunday, October 25, at his home in Bloomington. An influential physician with a long devotion to family-centered medicine, his life was firmly grounded in the southern Indiana soil and devoted to the family he raised with his wife of 62 years, Charmain "Tommie" Thompson Owens. Born in Norman, Indiana, to Edna Butler Owens and Obediah Owens, he graduated from Heltonville High School. Walt worked his way through Indiana University, Bloomington, and at the age of 21, he earned his M.D. degree from the IU School of Medicine. Walter never forgot the suffering and deprivation he witnessed during the Depression, and was ever grateful to the family, friends and the university that helped him escape the hardships of rural life. Walter was born with a club foot, and although he never let it limit his horizons, this physical defect cast a subtle influence over the course of his life. His family was too poor to pay for corrective surgery for him, so it became fundamental in Walter's later professional practice of medicine that quality care should be available to all regardless of their financial means. He was rejected by the Army during World War II because he could not march, but was welcomed into service at Scott Air Force Base as a specialist in obstetrics and gynecology during the "baby boom" years of 1954-56. Walter never participated in sports, but he kept fit by physical labor, mostly related to his lifelong stewardship of the family tree farm near Norman and his woodworking hobby. His specialty training was gained at Methodist and St.

Vincent's hospitals in Indianapolis. In 1956, Walter and Tommie entered into a five-year period of service to the Appalachian community of Whitesburg, Kentucky, where Walter was employed by the United Mine Workers Union. The couple and their four children were deeply affected by the poverty, political corruption, ignorance, and despair they witnessed there. Walter and Tommie determined to live their lives and raise their children with certain values which, years later, Walter shared with the Bloomington Unitarian-Universalist Church congregation: Respect the Earth from which we came. Respect and care for and develop your physical, intellectual, and spiritual strength. Respect your spouse, your children, and your parents. Bear children responsibly and rear them well, protecting them from evil. Be loyal to your extended family and to your immediate community. Support a just and effective government, but withhold support from governments whose burdens upon us outweigh their benefits. Respect individuality. "Do not bite off more than you can chew" when it comes to engagement with the world outside of your own community. Be attentive to the crises that face us and make common cause with our neighbors. Walter was a partner at the Fargo Clinic from 1961-1965, helping to open their hospital before returning to Bloomington. From 1965-1992, he practiced medicine in Bloomington, originally in a solo practice, later forming the partnership known as Bloomington OB-GYN with physicians William Anderson, Leland Matthews, Brant Ludlow, and Lillette Pratter. Walter Owens delivered approximately 8,000 babies in his career. Dr. Jean Creek and Dr. Owens built and practiced in the building at 421 West 1st Street in Bloomington. Jean Creek remembers Walter Owens as a fearless innovator, very eager to gain and share new information, surgical techniques, and instruments; fiber optic laparoscopy, microsurgery, and office ultrasound were all pioneered in Bloomington by Walter Owens. Dr. Anderson has stated that Walter was always a valued mentor to the younger physicians - not only as a physician, but also in terms of business management. Walter Owens served as a Clinical Associate Professor for Indiana University School of Medicine. He was at various times

Chief of Obstetrics, Chief of Surgery, and Chief of Staff of Bloomington Hospital. Even after he retired he continued to contribute to the development of this community hospital by donations of his hand-crafted furniture for fundraisers. Dr. Owens was outspoken in his belief that people should have control over their own bodies and welcomed patients asking questions and assuming control. To this end, and in support of responsible family planning, Dr. Owens volunteered medical services for Planned Parenthood of Monroe County for many years. In addition, he provided contraception information classes in numerous settings throughout the community at a time when such information was difficult, even illegal for young women to access. In 1982, Dr. Walter Owens played a pivotal role in the landmark Baby Doe medical ethics case. Dr. Owens provided steadfast, humane care and advocacy for his patients despite aggressive attacks from those who wanted to overturn the care decisions made by Baby Doe's parents. The parents' legal rights were repeatedly upheld by court decisions. Dr. Owens' position in the case was reported in a book by Jeff Lyons, "Playing God in the Nursery." Dr. Owens appeared on the Oprah Winfrey Show and testified before Congress regarding the rights of the handicapped. Even 27 years later, this case is still being debated. Walter planted thousands of trees in his lifetime and instilled in his family the long term value of a well-managed forest. Following his retirement in 1992, Walter devoted much of his time to woodworking, building furniture of oak, cherry, and walnut for his family and oak kitchen cabinets and the pulpit for his church. He and Tommie built two ultralight airplanes and become pilots. They traveled in their van camper to every state and Canadian province. Walter is survived by his wife Tommie, his sister Marie Settle, and four children: Katharine Whealton, Richard Owens, Caroline Owens, and Judy Owens; thirteen grandchildren: Karl and Thomas Whealton, Linda Suriyakham, Emily, Alison, and Eleanor Owens, Kate, Louis, and Anna Wersan, Rosalyn, Robin, and Ben Macy, Hillary Henegar, 2 great-grandchildren, Chase and Avery Whealton. He was preceded in death by son

Alan Owens and sister Ruth Ramsey. A celebration of life service will be held Dec. 22 at 2 p.m. at the Unitarian-Universalist Church of Bloomington, Indiana. Walter Owens wrote: "Blessed is the man whose neighbors are his friends - people who accept him as he is and help him bring out the best in himself, people who are tolerant of idiosyncrasies, constructive or not, yet intolerant of sociopathic evil, people who help one another without keeping a double-entry ledger of favors given and received." In this spirit, the family requests that anyone who wishes to honor Walter Owens should offer assistance to someone in need. Online condolences may be made to the family at [www.allenfuneralhome.org](http://www.allenfuneralhome.org).

# Tribute Wall

DG

“ Dear Tommie and family:

*We were so sorry we were unable to attend Walt's memorial. Walter was such a marvelous influence on our family. He lived across the street from us and baby sat a lot. As a child, I was very, very impressed with him. My Dad, Prof. Breneman had tremendous admiration for him.*

*Walt's memory will forever live in those who knew and loved him  
Please know we care.*

*Miriam Breneman Clark*

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**Dr. and Mrs. Gerald Clark** - March 22, 2013 at 08:21 AM

DB

“ *Walter did babysitting for the Breneman kids and was a profound influence on our lives, and one of my motivations for becoming a physician. Our father Professor Breneman considered him a genius and a dear friend. He manifested profound devotion to him in in terminal illness. His courage under fire in the Baby Doe case was exemplary. Human beings do not get any better than Walter Owens.*

*Dr. Bill Breneman*

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**Dr. William Breneman** - March 22, 2013 at 08:21 AM

TM

“ Dear Owens Family,

*Since it appears that I'll be unable to attend the memorial service, just wanted to tell you that Walt was clearly one of the finest individuals that I've known. His obituary reinforces that impression.*

*Sincerely,  
Ted Megremis*

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**Theodore Megremis** - March 22, 2013 at 08:21 AM

CM

“ Tommie and Family,

*Mary and I wish to express our sincere sympathy on your loss of Walt. You are in our thoughts and prayers.*

*Clarke and Mary Miller*

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**Clarke and Mary Miller** - March 22, 2013 at 08:21 AM

SH

“ Dear Family,

*It saddens our hearts to know that Walter is gone. He was always so kind to all of us--even though we didn't keep in close contact. We, Roland and Jeannine's children, always felt so lovingly toward all of you because of the great affection that our Grandma (Anna) had for Aunt Edna.*

*We pray that GOD will bless you all with peace in your hearts and many, many good memories of this very good man.*

*With love,*

*Jeannine Easton*

*Eric Easton*

*Terry (Easton) Roberts*

*Richard Easton*

*Sherry (Easton) Umphress*

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**Sherry Umphress** - March 22, 2013 at 08:21 AM