William Werner Orrison Jr., M.D., M.B.A.


Born on April 2, 1949, in Louisville, Ky., Bill was the eldest child of Agnes Rutherford Miller “Ruth” Orrison, R.N., and William Werner Orrison Sr., M.D., known as Werner. Bill grew up in Minneola, Plains, and Meade, Kans., where his father was among the last generation of country doctors, often making house calls to remote farms, equipped only with the contents of a black bag, sometimes accepting livestock as payment. From his earliest years, Bill witnessed his father’s devotion to humble patients and dreamed of joining him in practice as a medical doctor.

Bill graduated in 1967 from Meade High School, an Eagle Scout and an accomplished trick horseback rider. As a teen, while on a fishing trip with Werner, Bill suffered a freak accident that put him in the first of three near-death states during his life. Bill later described being drawn into a "tunnel of fog" while his father performed an emergency tracheotomy to save his son’s life. Attending the University of Kansas in Lawrence on an ROTC scholarship, Bill rose to commander of his Air Force squadron, but at the Phi Gamma Delta house he was known as “Doc,” for his unlicensed diagnostic skills. After Bill earned the lowest score in the class on his first chemistry test, the professor encouraged him to try another major. By semester’s end, Bill had the highest grade among his peers. He graduated from KU in 1971 and remained a lifelong fan of Jayhawk basketball.

While at KU, Bill attended a talk by the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, discovering that the hypnosis his father had used on patients in the absence of anesthesia was one and the same as transcendental meditation. Bill became a lifelong practitioner of meditation, to which he attributed his extraordinary powers of concentration and his tolerance for physical pain.

As a second-year student at the University of Kansas School of Medicine, Bill encouraged his 52-year-old father to undergo elective heart surgery. Dr. Orrison died on the operating table, and Bill, in guilt-ridden despair, dropped out of medical school. However, the Vietnam War still in the headlines, the U.S. Air Force gave Bill the option to repay his college scholarship as a sewer technician or to resume his studies toward becoming a military physician. Dr. William Werner Orrison Jr. graduated from medical school in 1975. That same year Bill married Kandee Kae Klein, a former Miss Kansas; the marriage ended in 1981.

After completing his medical internship at the University of Wisconsin, Bill remained in Madison to enter a residency in neurology and, subsequently, another in radiology, finishing in 1981. While a resident, Bill contracted meningitis from a patient, lapsing into a coma during which he had an out-of-body experience. After regaining consciousness, Bill had to learn to walk and talk again. As part of his cognitive therapy, Bill embarked on a study of English literature under the tutelage of his newspaper deliveryman, Thomas Nord, Ph.D.

Among Bill’s caretakers was Rebecca Spiller, R.N., whom Bill married in 1982. Bill and Becky had three children together: William Werner III, now of Las Vegas; Jennifer Jean, of San Diego, Calif.; and Michael Matthew, of Park City, Utah.

Bill completed two fellowships in neuroradiology, the first at Ulleval Hospital in Oslo, Norway (where he learned to speak Norwegian) in 1981, and the second at the University of Wisconsin in Madison.

By now an expert in the emerging field of magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), Bill returned to fulfill his obligation to the government as chief of neuroradiology and later chairman of radiology at Keesler Air Force Base in Biloxi, Miss., from 1982 to 1985, attaining the rank of major.
Out of the service, Dr. Orrison entered academic medicine at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, where he led the medical school’s efforts in neuroradiology, special procedures, non-invasive diagnosis, and MRI.

In 1997, Bill became professor and chairman of radiology at the University of Utah School of Medicine in Salt Lake City, and the Orrison family moved to Park City. He led cutting-edge research in magnetoencephalography (MEG), especially as a diagnostic tool for autism spectrum disorder. Colleagues admired him for promoting the exchange of ideas among department heads and for his unfailing empathy for patients and their families.

To become a better administrator and to promote his growing number of medical inventions, Bill earned his M.B.A. at the University of Utah in 2002. The following year he left academic medicine to open advanced medical-imaging centers in Las Vegas, though still publishing, lecturing, and conducting research on topics such as the intersection of imaging and genetics, shielding patients and technicians from secondary radiation, and the relevance of post-adolescent brain development in criminal culpability.

At this point in his career, Bill had written five textbooks on medical imaging, including the bible on the subject, Neuroimaging (W.B. Saunders Co., Philadelphia). At his death, Dr. Orrison had contributed 24 chapters to others’ books, authored or co-authored 145 major papers and 172 scholarly abstracts, secured 11 patents, and conducted nearly 2,400 hours of continuing education for practicing physicians needing to keep up with developments in medical imaging.

None of these professional accomplishments, however, was his foremost priority. Rather, Bill delighted in the interests of his three children, who regularly drew him to the basketball court, the ski slopes, and Disney theme parks. He tried his hand at writing “cowboy poetry” and children’s stories. As his family members and past mentors aged, Bill often suspended his pressing professional duties to lavish on them the same bedside care he had watched Werner give his rural patients. Bill’s marriage to Becky ended in 2011.

In June 2012, at an otherwise youthful 63, Bill suffered a massive heart attack (his third brush with death), but was encouraged throughout his recovery by his fiancée Heather Margaret Stanley, a Canadian synchronized swimmer who was then coaching performers with Cirque du Soleil in Las Vegas. Heather and “Wil,” as she calls him, married on Feb. 12, 2014, and the couple settled in the Red Rock area, together with Heather’s teenage children from a previous marriage, daughter Drew Reidun Stanley and son Finn Topher Stanley. For “Dr. O,” as they know him, helping raise the children was another opportunity for pure love.

When Bill’s condition became clinical in late 2016, “his bucket list became people,” as Heather recalls. Defying the normal debilities and pain of the disease, Bill and his college roommate John Cadwalader sailed the glaciated Alaskan coast; he gazed across the plains of Heather’s native Alberta; he applauded young horseback riders at the Rocky Mountain summer camp where he had sent his children and stepchildren. On Aug. 21 of this year, Bill returned to the farm fields of his native Kansas with his adult son Mike, his childhood friend Marc Cotrell, and KU pal John to watch the sun eclipsed for the last time during Bill’s earthly life.

William Werner Orrison Jr., M.D., is preceded in death by his parents, Werner and Ruth Orrison; his nephew Bryce Cyr Miquelon; and his cousin and mentor Wayman Rutherford Spence, M.D. In addition to spouse Heather, children Bill, Jenny and Mike, and stepchildren Drew and Finn, Bill is survived by younger sisters Mary Orrison Woods (husband Gregory Woods, M.D., and their children William, James, C. Andrew and Emily), of Atlanta, Ga., and Agnes Orrison “Ann” Miquelon, OTR/L (husband Bryan and their son Joey), of Indian Hills, Colo. -- as well as by thousands of patients alive today because Bill peered into their minds in search of disease and held their hands in comfort.

The Orrison family will host a memorial service on Sunday, Nov. 5, 2017, at 2:00 p.m., at the Cleveland Clinic for Brain Health in Las Vegas. Condolences can be expressed online via www.kraftsussman.com. To enable indigent children to experience summer camp, the family asks that memorial gifts be made to The Cheley Foundation (www.cheleyfoundation.org or 1420 N. Ogden St., Ste. 103, Denver CO 80218).