

OBITUARY

Homer Peabody; physician promoted education, athletics with 'amazing energy'

By Jack Williams
STAFF WRITER

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To San Diego's medical community, he was an old-school physician who chronicled history while keeping an eye on the future.

A celebration of life took place at 12:30 p.m. Jan. 6 at the [Barnes Family Tennis Center](#), with close to a 1000 people paying tribute to Homer.



As a champion of education and athletics – foundations of his San Diego upbringing – he spearheaded plans for what became the [Barnes Family Tennis Center](#) on city-owned land east of Robb Field in Ocean Beach. It opened in 1995 and became the headquarters for Youth Tennis San Diego.

"Without Homer, the Barnes Tennis Center wouldn't be here," said Linn Walker, executive director of the [Youth Tennis San Diego Foundation](#). "He was the father of it all. He was kind of a one-man bandwagon the way he sold people on the project."



To youths benefiting from the recreational and educational amenities of the Barnes Family Tennis Center, he was a father figure who always had time to share dreams and exchange volleys.

During the past year, about 10,000 children from throughout San Diego County have participated in 80 "[After School Tennis](#)" outreach programs offered by the center, many at elementary and middle school sites.



In addition to tennis coaching, the programs provide general education and tutoring opportunities.

Dr. Homer D. Peabody Jr., the retired medical director of what today is Sharp Rees-Stealy Medical Group, was a man whose energy seemed to match his many interests.

"He was constantly busy," said Linn Walker, executive director of the [Youth Tennis San Diego Foundation](#).

Dr. Peabody, named Mr. San Diego in 1997 by the San Diego Rotary Club, died Friday at Sharp Memorial Hospital in Kearny Mesa. He was 86.

The cause of death was cardiac arrest, said his wife, Betty.

"Homer was sort of a Renaissance man," said Dr. Donald Balfour, president and medical director of Sharp Rees-Stealy Medical Group. "He was talented in many ways."

Before retiring in 1985, Dr. Peabody helped put together the merger between Rees-Stealy, San Diego's oldest medical group, and the Sharp hospital network. He went on to compile a 300-page history of Rees-Stealy, which was published last year.

"Tennis has been an elite sport when it should be available to everyone because it can provide lifelong recreation," he told The San Diego Union-Tribune in 1994.

Dr. Peabody, a former high school and college tennis player, helped form the San Diego Tennis Patrons in 1953 to support junior tennis. He and other founding members of the group envisioned a tennis center that would provide opportunities for youths of all economic levels.

But their dream was put on hold for decades.

The catalyst was a \$1 million donation in 1993 by George E. Barnes, a philanthropist and former U.S. Tennis Association president whom Dr. Peabody befriended. The 121/2-acre center opened with 24 courts and an 11,000-square-foot youth activity building.

"Other communities view it as a prototype," Walker said.

Before his death, Dr. Peabody was writing a history of junior tennis in San Diego, a project that may be completed by others, Walker said.

Dr. Peabody also continued to be involved in the medical field as executive director of the Rees-Stealy Research Foundation, which is dedicated to conducting applied biomedical research.

"It was one of the things he cherished most," Dr. Balfour said. "He was basically the whole show."

Before becoming ill, Dr. Peabody worked with Chris Glembotski, director of the San Diego State University Heart Institute, in creating a fellowship program to support SDSU graduate students.

"Homer had amazing energy, both physical and intellectual," Glembotski said. "He was always inquisitive. Whenever we gave a research seminar, he asked the most probing, deeply thought-out questions. He kept up with technologies and research, including advances in molecular biology and stem-cell techniques."

Wayne Kennedy, a member of the Rees-Stealy foundation board and retired senior vice president of the University of California system, said students found somebody they could relate to in Dr. Peabody.

"We will never replace Homer; he was one of a kind," Kennedy said.

Dr. Peabody, born Nov. 16, 1919, in Denver, moved with his family to San Diego at age 6.

An experience as a Rees-Stealy patient at age 8 sparked an interest in medicine.

Treated for an earache by Dr. Rudolph Sundberg, one of the clinic's founding physicians, Dr. Peabody recovered quickly. Sundberg, his next-door neighbor during his childhood in Mission Hills, became his mentor and adviser through college and medical school.

Dr. Peabody graduated in 1937 from San Diego High School, where he was Associated Study Body president and lettered in basketball and tennis.

At 6 feet 3 and 187 pounds, he excelled on a Cavers basketball team that won Coast League and CIF Southern Section titles. He earned a basketball scholarship to Harvard University and continued his sports career, receiving his bachelor's degree in 1941.

Dr. Peabody received his medical degree in 1944 from Physicians & Surgeons College at Columbia University. His training was accelerated after he was inducted into the Army during World War II.

He left the Army Medical Corps as a captain in 1947 and underwent additional medical training at Rees-Stealy and the Mayo Clinic.

At the Mayo Clinic, he organized a barbershop quartet called the Pill Billies.

Dr. Peabody joined Rees-Stealy's staff in 1951 after earning a master's in medicine from the University of Minnesota.

As a pulmonary disease specialist, he urged generations of patients to quit smoking. He followed the advice after an adverse chest X-ray led him to quit in 1956.

"At first, I told patients not to come back until they had quit smoking, and some of them never came back," he wrote. "So I had to change the message."

Dr. Peabody became medical director of the Rees-Stealy Research Foundation in 1967 and medical director of the group in 1977.

He taught as an associate clinical professor of medicine at the University of California San Diego and as an adjunct professor at SDSU. He also was on the teaching faculty of Mercy Hospital for 27 years.

As a longtime member and one-time president of San Diego Rotary, Dr. Peabody delighted in organizing the club's annual Christmas charity program from 1961 to 1993.

"In October, he would begin the preparations and he knew every note in every part of the four-part harmony of every song," his wife said. "He organized the slide shows, all the music and the Santa Claus activities."

On Thursday, San Diego Rotary dedicated the annual Christmas program in Dr. Peabody's honor.

Dr. Peabody lent his voice to a barbershop quartet that performed at social functions for many years. The group broke up three years ago after the death of one of its members, Hie Thompson.

Dr. Peabody is survived by his wife, Betty, whom he married in 1971; daughters, Susan Ethel Christian and Sally Thayer Wilson, both of San Diego; son, David Westervelt Peabody of National City; stepson, Todd Stewart Conant of San Diego; five grandchildren; and a great-granddaughter. His first wife, Ann Westervelt, whom he married in 1943, died of breast cancer in 1969.

Donations are suggested to the Barnes Tennis Center Barnes Tennis Center at 4490 W. Point Loma Blvd. City, State, Zip: San Diego, CA 92107,
Phone: 619 221-9000 or to the Friends of Balboa Park, 215 Park Blvd., San Diego, CA 92101.