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BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES DIVISION

Medicine

ON THE MIDWAY

AN ENEMY IN OUR MIDST



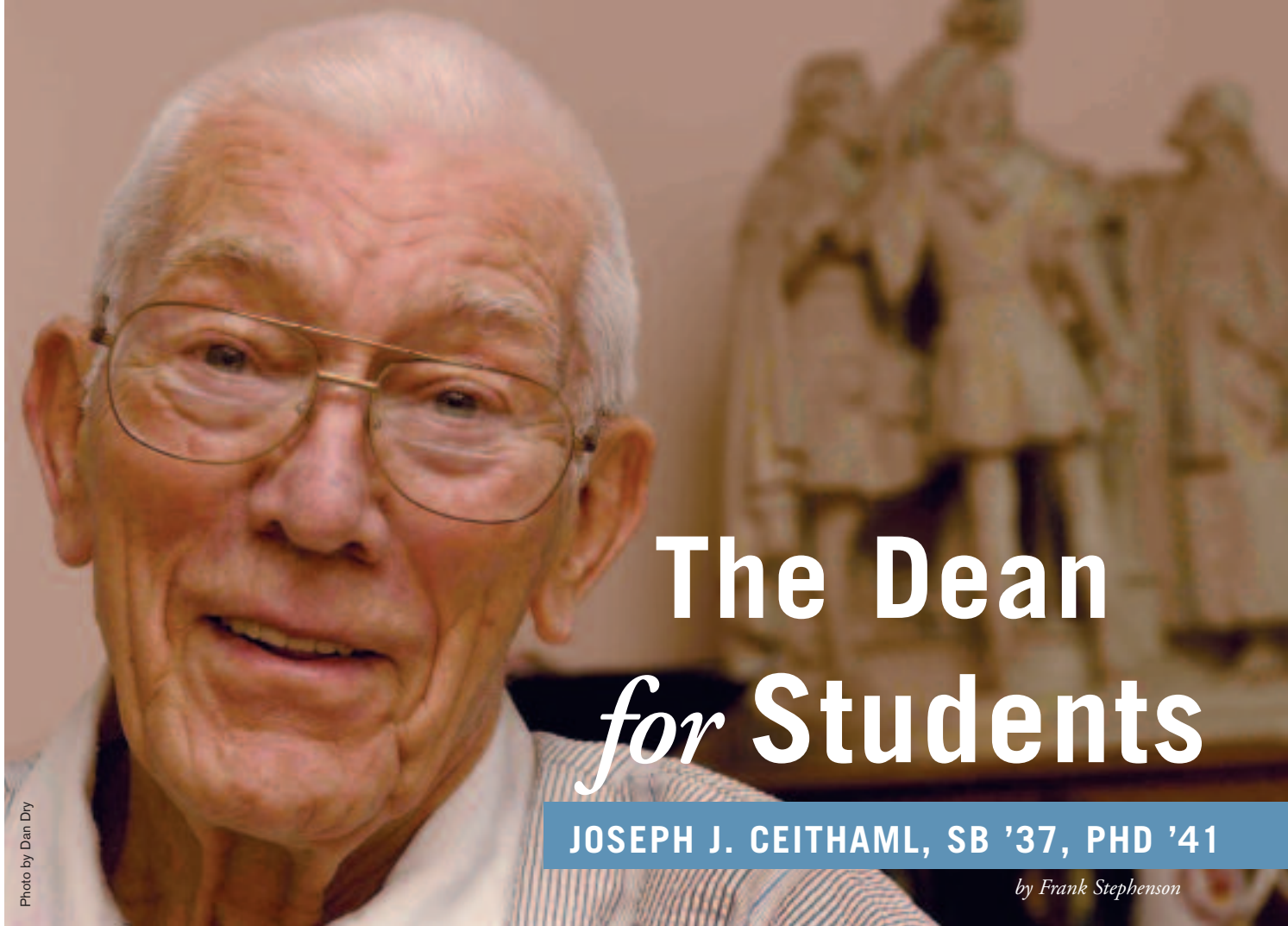


Photo by Dan Dry

The Dean *for* Students

JOSEPH J. CEITHAML, SB '37, PHD '41

by Frank Stephenson

On the occasion of a beloved dean's 90th birthday, it is fitting that a university devote some words to commemorate him.

But this isn't exactly a story about Joe Ceithaml. This story is more about what Ceithaml was about: his students.

And they certainly are his. In a way that is difficult to imagine these days—when schools devote entire departments to student recruitment, admission, financial aid and career counseling—Ceithaml served all those roles and one besides: He was a tireless, passionate advocate for the proposition that med school students should focus on learning their occupation, not fall victim to a preoccupation with meeting tuition. “Most of us would never have been able to afford to go to medical school, and we knew he was always coming up with loan funds and scholarship funds,” said Everett Given, MD '59, in a 1994 *Medicine on the Midway* article titled “A Retiring Man.” Given is one of the nearly 3,000 physicians and 1,500 research biologists to earn degrees during the 35 years Ceithaml served as dean of students in the Biological Sciences Division and the Medical School.

“He knew students couldn't make it if they had to worry about finances,” Given said. “He made it his business to know the

students and their families. And when my two sons graduated from Pritzker in 1980, he was still doing that. He's truly a remarkable man.”

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Even today, nearly a dozen years after his retirement, Ceithaml's dedication to that principle is as firm as it was when he took the job in 1951. At his insistence, a yearlong series of alumni tributes nationwide, culminating in a June 3, 2006, celebration on campus, has been devoted to raising money for the Joseph J. Ceithaml Scholarship Fund. The fund was created in 1999 by alumni to honor Ceithaml's lifetime of dedication to the university.

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“The party part of it I could do without, but to raise money for the scholarship fund, I’ll do virtually anything that needs to be done because I know how much it meant to a lot of students when they were coming through,” he said. “I can’t think of one instance where I let a student take time off to work. I told them, ‘I’ll find money, loan funds with no interest, and you take all the time you want to pay it back, but pay it back so the next generation can have those funds.’ And that’s what they did.”

A LIFETIME COMMITMENT

Joseph J. Ceithaml’s affiliation with the University of Chicago spans more than 70 of his 90 years. Born in 1916 into a Chicago family of Czechoslovakian immigrants on the southwest side of town, Ceithaml graduated from Lindblom High School as valedictorian of his class. In 1933, he became the first of his family’s six children to go straight into college. At Chicago he soon discovered a passion for biochemistry, and in 1937 with the world on the brink of war, he earned a bachelor’s degree in the field and quickly jumped into a doctoral program, completing it just weeks before Pearl Harbor.

Ceithaml immediately became one of thousands of young researchers swept up in the war effort. Instead of a foxhole, Ceithaml fought from a biochemistry lab, recruited for a malaria research project run by the Office of Scientific Research and Development of the U.S. War Manpower Commission. It was an exhilarating time for young Ceithaml: Not only was he part of a national effort to fight a familiar dreaded disease with better drugs, but on a personal level he had hit his stride as well, marrying Ann Bednarik in 1942, a fellow gymnast whom he’d known since high school.

But it was the chance occasion of substituting for a Chicago pre-med advisor called off to war that made all the difference in Ceithaml’s career. What was supposed to be only a summer-long stint turned into two years. It soon dawned on Ceithaml that if he didn’t escape from these new administrative duties—which he realized he enjoyed far more than he’d imagined—his dreams of a life in teaching and research would never materialize. So in 1948 he and Ann left Chicago for a post-doctoral fellowship at Caltech, where he worked with George Beadle, a visionary geneticist who in 1958 would share the Nobel Prize in medicine—three years before being named president at Chicago.

But within two years, Ceithaml was back on his favorite campus, doggedly pursuing twin ambitions to become not only a top-drawer researcher in biochemistry but as a teacher as well—and he succeeded. In 1950, the university handed him a Quantrell Award, the highest honor Chicago bestows on undergraduate teachers.

When Lowell Coggeshall, the dean of the BSD at the time, offered him the job of the med school’s dean of students, Ceithaml didn’t bat an eye. He agreed to take the job on the conditions he could still teach and do his research.

That was 1951. To his dismay, Ceithaml soon realized that his hallmark energy and perseverance had limits. Try as he might, he couldn’t keep all three balls—teaching, research and his new job—in the air at once. Something had to go. First it was teaching, then, two years later, his beloved research. Looking back, Ceithaml said he has no regrets at all about the choice he made. “If I had it to do all over again,” he said, “I’d do it the same way.”

THE DEAN FOR STUDENTS

With his no-nonsense, patrician demeanor, accented by a perpetual crew cut and a militarily correct posture, Ceithaml exuded the kind of professionalism and serious devotion to the task at hand that he expected every one of his new charges to adopt. But he always did so with a firm handshake and a twinkle in his eyes.

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If students didn’t already know it when they first set foot on campus, they soon learned that when it came to finding real help that they could count on, Ceithaml was the man.

Testimonies to his seemingly limitless ability to get things done, and in the most effective way, abound. Many alumni describe his remarkable ability to connect with them through compassion. Students picked up on his sincerity and determination to use his position to help them make the best advantage of their time on campus.

Susan Shumway, MD '60, now a retired pediatrician in Encino, Calif., fondly recalled her first encounter with Dean Joe. "He spoke with the students, not at us, and he always spoke from the heart," she said. "I think many times, he knew more about what we really needed than we knew ourselves. You could go to him with any problem you might be having and he was very reassuring, very compassionate."

Martin "Marty" Pops, MD '64, not only credits Ceithaml with his medical training, but his career that took a similar path. While finishing his training in psychiatry at University of California-Los Angeles, Pops found himself at the same crossroad Ceithaml had faced in 1950—to stay in administrative work or pursue a career in research. An anguished Pops sat down with Ceithaml at a professional meeting and revealed his dilemma.

"He told me, 'Marty, if you want to commit academic suicide, you might not want to [take the administrative job]. Because if you do, and do it right, you're just not going to have much time to do anything else,'" Pops recalled.

Now retired in Los Angeles, Pops went on to spend 31 years on the UCLA faculty, stepping down as dean of students for its med school in 1996. He said that it was a rare day in his long career as dean that he didn't reflect on how Joe Ceithaml would have handled a particular situation.

"Over the years, I'd see Joe at professional meetings, and he'd always say it was the students who made him look good," Pops said. "He was always thinking about the students, about how they needed to learn to take the focus off themselves and put the focus

on patients. He taught us that this should be our guiding principle."

As for Ceithaml's famous influence over students' lives at Chicago, Pops had heard rumors even before he applied for admission. He soon learned just how much on the mark those rumors were.

Applying fairly late in the admissions pipeline for the entering class of 1960, Pops interviewed with Ceithaml on a Saturday morning before

hopping a plane to Cleveland to visit some family members. Ceithaml had concluded the interview by saying he'd have to run Pops' application by the school's admissions committee. Pops

thanked him, gave him the Cleveland address of where he'd be staying for a few days, and left.

When Pops arrived at the Cleveland airport that evening, he was greeted by a grinning aunt and uncle frantically waving a telegram. It was from Ceithaml, announcing Pops' acceptance for the class of 1960. In recounting the tale, Pops chuckled.

"There's no way the admissions committee could have been called from the time I'd interviewed that morning," he said. "This bore home the rumors that it was Joe Ceithaml who made all the decisions. At the time, I don't think this was all that unusual in med schools. But I know that back then at UC, Joe Ceithaml was the admissions committee."

Ceithaml fondly remembers Pops and so many others, even if their names don't spring to mind like they once did. Once he could call the first name of nearly every student on campus. It was a trademark characteristic that made each student feel special.

"I took my job seriously, but I never took myself all that seriously," Ceithaml said with a chuckle. "I like to think of myself as being as good a dean for students as I was dean of students."

LIFTING MONEY WORRIES

A product of the Depression, the son of a machinist for the Bell Telephone Company, Ceithaml instinctively understood how financial hardships commonly threatened or doomed altogether the med school ambitions of many promising students. One of the first items of business he took up upon becoming dean of students was to establish a loan fund to help students in dire financial need. Ceithaml started with \$25,000 in the fund in 1952, and by the time he stepped down 35 years later, it had grown to more than \$6 million.

When Ann, his wife of 43 years, died of cancer in 1985, he set up a separate loan fund in her name to honor her for all the years she supported his career. To this day, the fund offers interest-free loans to qualified students, while the other funds continue to offer low-interest loans.

Whenever he could, Ceithaml would augment his loan funds with scholarships and even part-time jobs that he'd arrange for students.

Ed Comay, MD '57, also a retired Los Angeles psychiatrist, remembers the latter well. Even with support from the G.I. Bill, Comay said he couldn't make ends meet once he enrolled, so he went to Ceithaml looking not for a handout but a job. He soon found himself working part-time in the school's medical chemical lab.

"I got a room in the hospital and a hundred dollars a month, which paid for my meals," Comay said. "So between this job and the G.I. Bill, that's how I made it through school."

Ceithaml's knack for arranging scholarships for worthy recipients was renowned. Two of the university's most distinguished medical school alumni fully credit a Ceithaml scholarship for their careers. The spring issue of this magazine



Photo by Dan Dry

Joe Ceithaml with his second wife, Mildred, whom he married in 1989. He also has two children: Lenore, who practices immigration law in San Diego, and Eric, chief of pediatric cardiovascular surgery at the University of Florida at Jacksonville.



Photos from left: Ceithaml (far right) receives the Quantrell Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching in 1950 from Chancellor Robert Hutchins (second from left); Ceithaml with his students; the dean at a reunion in 1991.

featured the story of one, Russ Zajtchuk, MD '63, a cardiothoracic surgeon who went on to become one of the world's foremost authorities in telemedicine. One of Zajtchuk's fellow students, Marvin J. Stone, MD '63, is now director of the

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Sammons Cancer Center at Baylor University. Stone also finished school largely thanks to a scholarship arranged by Ceithaml, whom he names as one of the two most influential figures in his career.

When he hears such grateful words today, Ceithaml dismisses any suggestion that his efforts are a sign of magnanimity. "No, it wasn't magnanimous at all, it's just what should have been done all along," he said matter-of-factly. "I was always interested in finding funds—whether loans, scholarships or part-time jobs—for students to be able to complete their studies without having to drop out of school.

"As a consequence, I think there's a fair number of alumni who benefited from the monies we found them, and they remember that. They're still sending in their support [to the med school] and have repaid this aid many, many times over."

Ceithaml is troubled by what he calls the "outrageous" cost of getting a good med school education today, citing a recent estimate that a Pritzker student who started in 2005 will need upwards of \$250,000 to graduate. This financial mountain casts

a long shadow over his lifetime crusade to lift money worries from students' backs so they can concentrate on becoming good doctors.

"When I was dean, I strongly urged students to avoid having personal debt loads of more than \$25,000 by the time they graduated," he said. "This way, they wouldn't be so tempted to go into fields that paid higher salaries, just to get their debts paid, instead of doing something they really wanted to do."

Today, it's not unusual for grads to leave a four-year med school program owing \$140,000 or more in various student loans. "This kind of debt puts an enormous pressure on students to choose between doing the things they want to do and things they think they have to do, and I find that unfortunate," he said.

But what hasn't changed, in Ceithaml's view, is what med school students have always needed far more than money. Regardless of how bright they are, young people who are considering medical careers need not apply if they aren't fully committed to tackling the tough intellectual work.

"It's never been enough to want to go to med school," he said. "You've got to be committed, and that's something that's never changed and I don't think ever will."

Fittingly, Dean Ceithaml has asked that gifts for his 90th birthday celebration be directed to the Joseph J. Ceithaml Scholarship Fund. For more information about this fund, about Ceithaml's remarkable life and career at the University of Chicago, and about the June celebration, visit <http://bsdalumni.uchicago.edu/ceithaml/> or contact the Medical & Biological Sciences Alumni Association at (888) 303-0030.