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In Memory of William Kamell



'Compassionate, devoted' surgeon

By Mike Maslanik, staff writer

Canandaigua, NY – Compassionate caregiver, doting grandfather, man of deep and profound faith. These are just some of the ways family and friends will remember Dr. William M. Kamell, a longtime area orthopedic surgeon who died Oct. 16 at the age of 63.

Dr. Kamell had such a deep and abiding passion for life, they said, that he still found reasons to celebrate even as a rare autoimmune condition robbed him of the things he loved to do.

"He affirmed that life is good and worth living," said Dr. Kamell's oldest daughter, Lisa Hough, of Canandaigua. "In the end, it was not always easy, but he chose not to live in bitterness."

Dr. Kamell lived in Canandaigua since 1976, the year he opened Canandaigua Orthopedic Associates. After his illness, called in medical terms "catastrophic antiphospholipid anti-body syndrome," forced him to retire from surgery, he established Finger Lakes Independent Medical Exam Associates.

He also served with distinction in Vietnam as a flight medic for the U.S. Air Force, accompanying helicopter crews on missions.

Dr. Kamell was born in Egypt in 1945 to a Coptic Christian family at a time when adherents to that religion faced discrimination from the government. Seeking a better life for his family, Dr. Kamell's father illegally emigrated from Egypt to the United States. It took another year for Kamell and his mother to join him in America.

The family settled in New Jersey, where Kamell, at 14, started attending St. Peter's College in Jersey City. After graduating, he went on to Cornell University Medical School in New York City.

While in medical school, he met his wife, Sylvia, while riding an elevator to a mutual friend's Hanukkah party. It was love at first sight.

From then on, the young couple spent their Sundays walking through Central Park on their way to the Gospel Tabernacle Church, where he grew into the faith.

The two married after Dr. Kamell completed his residency in Seattle, Wash., and spent the next five months working at a mission hospital in Israel, where his fluency in Arabic proved indispensable in treating many Arab patients. After that, he and Sylvia moved to the Rochester and Kamell took a job at Strong Memorial Hospital.

Dr. Kamell was an unusually compassionate surgeon, family members said, and would often pray with his patients before their surgeries. They saw evidence of his personal touch in the many patients who attended his memorial service.

“People came up to us during calling hours and showed us their surgical scars,” Hough said. “They’d say, ‘I’m still walking today because of Dr. Kamell.’”

If he was a stand-out doctor, Dr. Kamell was an even better father, his children said.

“I know other children of surgeons grow up feeling like they never had a father,” said son Andrew Kamell, himself a palliative care doctor in Asheville, N.C. “Dad wasn’t like that at all.”

Dr. Kamell made every effort to spend time with his family, whether at 6 a.m. devotions every day or rearranging his schedule to attend evening sporting events.

He also had a true lust for life. Every meal was a “a feast fit for a king,” his daughter Miriam Kamell said, and Hough has fond memories of helping her father with one of his favorite activities: Using his trusty chainsaw to cut firewood.

Faith in God was one of Dr. Kamell’s defining characteristics, his family said. He was an active member of the Canandaigua Baptist Church who often volunteered his back porch for sunrise services on Easter, at least until the time the trumpeter’s lips froze to his mouthpiece, said pastor Doug Allen. He also went on several mission trips, working in hospitals in Kenya and the Dominican Republic.

Dr. Kamell has good reason to put his faith in God, his family said: because of an incident that took place in Vietnam. One day, he was sitting at his desk between helicopter missions when he felt an urge to go outside, Hough said. No sooner did he leave his office when a rocket crashed through the roof and landed in the middle of his desk. Several people were killed, but Dr. Kamell didn’t get a scratch.

“That really gave him a sense that God had a purpose in his life,” Hough said.