

## **Health Headlines**

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### **“It’s Been A Privilege To Serve”**

**Bronx Chemist Amasses 47 Years of Dedicated Service to Veterans**

BRONX, NY – Monday, August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2010, will mark the end of an era. That date marks the well-earned retirement of Mr. Alan Absgarten, Chemist and Supervisor of the James J. Peters (JJP) VA Pulmonary Function Lab. Mr. Absgarten has served America’s Veterans for 47 years; 43 of those years, right here at the JJP. This remarkable achievement was noted by his colleagues, Huguette Laroche-Charles and Jorge Cedeno, who visited the Office of Public Affairs to express their gratitude for his many noteworthy contributions. An interview was conducted and a treasure-trove of information was gleaned during the process. Following are some excerpts from that interview.

A Bronx, New York native, Absgarten received his degree in Bio Chemistry from Hunter College in 1963. During his college days he had interned at the Rockefeller Institute in midtown New York. His work there involved studies on enzymes and enzyme chemistry. Following his graduation from Hunter, Absgarten took a position in a special “Chem lab” in the Brooklyn VA Medical Center. He recalled vividly, the sight of the yet uncompleted Verrazano Narrows Bridge, still the largest suspension bridge in the United States.

“Before that bridge was finished,” explained Absgarten, “most of the employees at the Brooklyn VA lived on Long Island. Once it was finished, there was a mass exodus to Staten Island and that became something of a haven for Brooklyn VA staff.”

As memorable a sight as was the Verrazano Narrows Bridge, it paled in comparison to the memories evoked by the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, Jr in November of 1963. Absgarten vividly recalled that fateful day: “Everything seemed to stop. It was as though time stood remarkably still, for a very long period of time. People were dumfounded; were numb. There was a feeling of let down, of lost hope. Later, we all wondered aloud about how the world might have been different if the tragedy hadn’t occurred.”

That was clearly an earth-shattering event, but there many very happy times, too. It was in Brooklyn, on a blind date, that Absgarten met his future wife, Marian. At the time, she was a student caseworker at Brookdale Hospital. The two dated for several years and married in 1967, shortly after Absgarten took a job with the James J. Peters VA (then commonly referred to as the “Kingsbridge Veterans Administration Hospital”).

Absgarten came to “Kingsbridge” to help establish the new pulmonary lab. He would frequently visit area hospitals to compare notes on what others were doing in the field. He would bring these ideas, along with his own, to the development of the

program here. He speaks proudly of the time invested in building something useful for our Veterans. “We were doing cutting edge procedures, here,” stated Absgarten, “processes that were not commonly used elsewhere in VA.”

Al Absgarten’s early years were also heavily influenced by his work in research, which was seeing increased funding from federal appropriators. He and his colleagues were introducing new medical methodologies, and studying the effects of various drugs on respiratory activity. At that time, in a lab not far from his own, Doctor Roslyn Yalow was refining her work on radioisotopes and the process of radioimmunoassay. Her work, which would ultimately win her the 1977 Nobel Prize in Medicine, created quite a stir. These were exciting times in VA medicine.

“The old “Kingsbridge” hospital was a bustling place,” recalled Absgarten. “We had over 700 inpatient beds and we were at the height of the Vietnam War. It was easy to feel as though your job made a difference. We faced the ravages of war and the evolving miracles of medicine, every single day.”

Absgarten’s lab was on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor of the old “F” building and he recalled the atmosphere being cordial and welcoming. He remembers the move from the old building to the new building in the mid 1980s. He noted with some sense of nostalgia, the very different atmosphere in the new building.

“There were no metal detectors or guards at the door in those days,” said Absgarten, “It was an open and friendly space. Despite the very busy pace, people treated each other with respect and colleagues often socialized with one another after work.”

Absgarten noted that the move between buildings was hectic. “We were schlepping stuff from one place to the other. We had materials in 10 different places. But everyone pulled together, like we always did, and we got settled very quickly.”

At some point in the late 1980's, personal computers began showing up in workspaces everywhere. Absgarten, admittedly "not a computer person," found that patient interactions and reliance on "data" would change the scope of the doctor/patient or technician/patient relationship. He endeavored to make the most of the new technologies, while at the same time keeping the friendly and personal demeanor that had the effect of soothing patients and making them feel safe.

"When I started in this business," recalled Absgarten, "we were using slide rules and pencils. Later came the calculators and, of course, now we have super fast computers. But in my view and in the view of people whom I respected, personal observations were always critical to understanding and connecting with the patient. For that reason, no matter how good the technology, I avoided getting into the habit of relying only on processed data to form my opinions relative to my patients. Computers and tests can give you more data, but it's not a substitute for knowing your patients. You have to put these technologies in the context of the whole person." Absgarten's practical and personal approach to patient care has served the medical center and its patients remarkably well for many years.

On a personal note, Marian and Al Absgarten raised a daughter, Dana and a son, Eric, in nearby Dobbs Ferry, NY. Both children excelled in their academic studies. Their daughter, Dana, currently resides in Portland, Oregon, where both she, and her husband, Andy, teach in the local middle school. Their son, Eric, lives on Long Island and recently graduated from Stonybrook University, with a degree in Biology. Unlike his dad, he is very computer savvy. Marian teaches elementary school in Scarsdale, New York.

On the subject of his pending retirement, Al Absgarten was somewhat reticent. "I guess it's a little scary, at first." He said, "When you do something for as long as I have, it becomes second nature. That said, it will be nice to sleep in once in a while and to travel." Seeing his sister and brother in law in Israel is first on his "to do list."

Absgarten mentioned his love of sports – especially the NY Yankees - and the possibility of traveling to Florida to see baseball's spring training. He has an interest in "giving back" to his community, and thought he might volunteer for "a day or two, per week." Most importantly, he will have more time to spend with his family and his 5-year-old grandson, David, who calls him, "Bop." Absgarten admitted to being the best customer at Toys-R-Us. "My garage looks like a kindergarten playground," he stated, with delight.

Reflecting further on his retirement, Absgarten had some insights for current employees. "A career is really about a journey," he said. "You never really know where the road will take you. It's important to be receptive to the people and ideas you encounter, along the way. There are many days when you feel like you could have done better, but there are also plenty of days when you know you put in your best effort. In the end, it is really a comfort to come to a place where you know your work can make a difference in someone's life."

Asked to think of something he'd like to say to his colleagues and patients, Absgarten said, without hesitation; "It's been a great honor for me to work here. It's been a privilege to serve our veterans, and to work with so many caring people."

Well said, my friend. Well said, indeed.

For more information related to this story or the James J. Peters VA Medical Center, please contact James E. Connell, III, Director of Community and Government Relations, at 718.584.9000, Ext. 6620.

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