

Western Trauma Association
Past President Interview
R. Christie Wray, Jr., MD interviewing Steve Shackford, MD
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Western Trauma Association – 2003 Past President Interviews

Wray: Starting off Steve, why don't you tell us how you got interested in medicine in general, not your particular specialty but just medicine in general.

Shackford: My interest began when I was very young I was probably nine or ten years old and I was impressed with our family physician who always seemed to handle medical problems or any kind of problems that we had so well. He was a very caring and empathic individual and I said, I want to be like him and that was it.

Wray: How did you pick out the undergraduate school you went to, what factors affected your choices?

Shackford: I wanted to have a strong science, a school with strong science. I actually applied to Occidental but didn't get in there, but the other school that appealed to me was the University of Southern California, which I was fortunate to get in to. Actually, I was an athlete in those days and actually ended up playing baseball at USC so that was another attractive thing to that school.

Wray: And what position did you play?

Shackford: I pitched.

Wray: Where you a fastball pitcher, curve ball pitcher or.....

Shackford: I was lucky, because I was an accurate pitcher. I was a reliever in those days and we actually had a pretty good team. We won two national championships when I was there.

Wray: That must have been exciting.

Shackford: It was, it really was great knowing guys who eventually went on to play major league baseball too and had very successful careers.

Wray: So having chosen early in life as you mentioned about a career in medicine you were a pre-medicine student?

Shackford: Yes.

Wray: How did you choose where you went to medical school?

Shackford: The only school that I was able to get in was St. Louis University. It was an interesting story too, because I had made the alternate list there, but had not been accepted to the entering class and at that time it was the height of the Vietnam war and actually I was enlisting in the Navy and lived in San Diego and in those days San Diego was a relatively small town and they did not have an induction center there, so I had to go out to Los Angeles. I actually had gone through the physical testing and all the quiz taking and the test taking and the urine testing and what have you and I was just about to be sworn into the Navy when my father called the induction center and I guess that day, that very day that afternoon my letter of acceptance to St. Louis University arrived, so I was pretty lucky, but I went right across the hall and signed up for the officers program.

Wray: You couldn't have cut it much closer than that.

Shackford: Nope, I was very lucky.

Wray: How about your choice of general surgery training programs. What affected your decision in where you ended up there?

Shackford: Well, I was obligated to take my post-graduate training in the services, and so I applied for the Categorical training program at the Naval Hospital in San Diego and was fortunate enough to get into that program. I was on a Navy scholarship actually to medical school, so that severely limited the number of places that I could go for my residency training at that time.

Wray: You said you wanted to be a surgeon. What factors influenced that decision?

Shackford: Well, I originally wanted to be a pediatrician but when I went to medical school and actually rotated on the pediatric services and saw the suffering in those children, it was very difficult for me to take. In addition, parallel to that, I was always impressed with how self-assured and confident the surgeons were and I never realized how much I really liked my surgical rotations. I guess my paralyzing empathy for children and my interest in surgery made me a surgeon.

Wray: General surgery has changed a lot over your professional career. What were some of the striking things that have changed since you were an intern or a low level resident compared to today?

Shackford: The first and probably the detrimental thing is the supreme specialization we have. I think that really has hurt the practice of general surgery. Something I think that has actually helped our patients and also has helped has been the minimally invasive approaches, but again those forces I think have partitioned general surgery now and you have a society of laparoscopic and endoscopic surgeons and they somehow are...now I understand that they are going to be a specialty of abdominal surgeon and that's one thing I like about Trauma, you're comfortable in the chest, you're comfortable in the

abdomen, you're comfortable in the extremities. We are probably the only last general surgeons.

Wray: Speaking of trauma, exactly what factors lead you to become interested in trauma?

Shackford: I had a mentor when I was in the Navy. A lot of the surgeons who taught me were either in Vietnam or at that time returned from Vietnam and they had a real interest and a real expertise in trauma. My mentor was a guy named Dick Virgilio who was just an outstanding and a great teacher and knew so much about basic physiology that I again wanted to emulate what Dick was and so I went into trauma surgery and then into academics because of him.

Wray: What has been some of the high points exclusive of WTA and what have been some of the high points in your professional career?

Shackford: Well again, career in the Navy I enjoyed that and probably if I didn't have children, I probably would still be in the service. It was very difficult to be deployed somewhere and then talk to your family by satellite carrier. I think my Naval career was a high point. Being director of Trauma and setting up the system in San Diego, the regional trauma system there, with the other individuals who helped forge that system, Gail Cooper, Brent Eastman and others it was a very great time and my partners in San Diego were wonderful, David Holt, Bob Mackersie, Jim Davis and John Hansboro, who has subsequently has passed away, but was a great group of people, very good very energetic and we all shared a common goal and that was great and then of course being Chairman at Vermont for the last almost 15 years has been a real high point. I've learned a lot about being a leader and about being somebody who can organize. Those have been really enjoyable and great highlights, but the WTA is way up there.

Wray: Speaking of that; how did you first become associated or aware of the WTA?

Shackford: I was in an airport, I will never forget it. It was in an airport with John Weigelt and Dave Feliciano and Dave suggested to both of us that we ought to look into becoming a member and we talked about it and it seemed like such a great group and the thing that really attracted me was that everybody brings their families and it's a pretty casual atmosphere and I went to my first meeting and thought it was terrific and joined up.

Wray: Do you recall where that first meeting was located?

Shackford: I think it was in Jackson, I think it was Jackson Hole.

Wray: How over your time with the WTA which now is fairly extensive, how do you see the scientific program changed or if any?

Shackford: Well, I have just seen, it's subtle, but it's not been, it hasn't been a cataclysmic change, but there's been a subtle change of introduction of more basic science I think and

probably if you will a more scientific program. I think that has some good points and it also has some detrimental points. I look at the membership of the WTA as being a nice combination a nice blend of multi-specialties, as you know Chris we have plastic surgeons, orthopedic surgeons, emergency room physicians and so forth and when you get into parochial issues about cell signing I think you may lose the interest of some of the audience. On the other hand, I think a lot of things, like today having a conference on mass casualty does apply to all of the specialties. So I think that we haven't let the pendulum swing too far into the ultra-science.

Wray: Ancillary part of the WTA of course is the social events. Have there been any highlights in that area that you would like to mention?

Shackford: I think that the welcoming reception, the banquet and the various types of dinners, you know the pasta get-togethers and so-forth. They were terrific and my wife and my kids have now, they have sort of grown up in the WTA and they kind of know everybody and it's really great. It reminds me a little bit of my time in the military. I know guys that I was with in the military, I can not see them for five or ten years and then see them at a meeting or something and it was just like yesterday we talked, we just pick up the conversation just like nothing has changed and that's the way it is with the WTA, I mean we will go a year without seeing people and then you know, there they are and you can just kind of keep up the thread of what's going on. Jan Cogbill is a good example, I haven't seen Jan in a couple of years and right away we just show up and, and we have this common experience called the WTA. It's more than a meeting it's an experience.

Wray: How did you get involved in the administrative structure of the WTA?

Shackford: Steve Carveth, I think he was president at Snowbird, happened to catch me in the Keyhole restaurant and asked me to be program chairman and I was speechless. I was thrilled that someone would ask me to participate in the organization and without hesitation. When Dave Feliciano moved on to president, I think Dave suggested my name to the publications chair and so I was publications chair for seven, eight or nine maybe even ten years I guess. It was enjoyable and I moved up, fortunate enough to be the Vice-president.

Wray: Do you have any thoughts or ideas that you would like to pass along about the future of the WTA as you see it?

Shackford: I would I think getting an Issues committee that the past presidents and you suggested that we get more people involved. I look at the young people coming up and I see in them the enjoyment of the WTA experience like I have and they feel for this organization like I do and we need to get them involved. I think this Issues committee is a good way to do that. They're bright, they're energetic and they will lead us going forward. The WTA is well respected among professional societies. I have been on the

Board now, the AAST, East, and the WTA and I think that we get more done in a shorter period of time than those other boards ever did and we do it with a lot of fun.

Wray: Are there any concluding thoughts you would like to leave?

Shackford: Well I just know that periodically like we did in 2001, the organization sort of has a strategic planning session and everybody looks at the mission statement and has an opportunity to change, because there will be change in the future and the WTA is going to have to change with that.

Wray: Thank you very much Steve.

Shackford: Thank you, Chris.