

Conversations About Aging

Dr. Bob McAfee, 84

May 6, 2019

Diane narration

Dr. Bob McAfee, a retired surgeon, lives with his wife Doris on the same street in Portland, Maine that he grew up on. He had coveted the house they live in ever since he watched it being built in the 50s when he was in college. When it went on the market he snapped it up. It's where he and Doris raised their four children and it's where they hope to live out the rest of their days.

Dr. McAfee

That's the plan. Yeah.

Diane

How do you plan for something like that? Is there anything additional that you had to do to make it possible?

Dr. McAfee

No. We could have lived at any facility because I knew the neighborhood and felt comfortable with it, I'd had no desire to go and live in Cape Elizabeth or Falmouth or South Portland or any place other than right here.

Diane narration

Dr. McAfee remembers every store and business that used to be in his neighborhood when he was a boy. From the soda fountain where he and his friends drank vanilla cokes and solved the problems of the world to the bakery where he folded his newspapers every morning.

Dr. McAfee

I was a paperboy. I had I two, double routes this route here and one down in the Rosemont area, morning paper route. Don Leadbetter ran the bakery. He's the one that set up the Two Lights restaurant out there. Yeah. And there was a little house next to it. That's where he retired to. But every

morning in the winter particularly, they'd drop my papers off in front of his place. I'd take them, put them inside, fold them, he'd let me come in where it was nice and warm, fold the papers, and then just before I were to leave, he'd come out with a doughnut or something and give it to me and pat me on the back. You go have a good day.

Diane

They talk about the good old days.

Dr. McAfee

Well, it was.

Diane narration

After high school, Dr. McAfee went to Bates College in Lewiston and in 1960, graduated from Tufts University School of Medicine in Boston. He was the first person in his family to become a doctor. During his internship, he decided he wanted to be a surgeon.

Diane

Why did you decide to become a surgeon?

Dr. McAfee

Well, in the old days everyone had to have a rotating internship after medical school. You had to spend a year rotating through medicine, surgery, pediatrics, emergency medicine, uh, and you had some electives. And it was obvious to me when I got in the operating room that that's where I learned to be and it's an exciting place. It could be a therapeutic place at the same time. It was a much more personal service to a patient than checking their blood pressure, you know, and so I said, that's what I want to do. I want to be in surgery.

Dr. McAfee

That was during the time in which vascular surgery, vessel surgery started and synthetic grafts were being made and techniques were developed. One could replace blood vessels. Prior to that you had cadaver vessels that

were kept in the freezer that didn't work very well and weren't sized or anything. You had to sort of take what you had. Anyway, I got very much in this on the ground floor of that and I did a lot of vascular surgery.

Diane narration

He stopped doing surgery in 1996. He says his greatest joy was caring for patients, but by participating in the Cumberland County Medical Society, the Maine Medical Association and eventually, the American Medical Association, or the AMA, Dr. McAfee truly has found his voice and learned that he could make a difference on a national level, a big difference.

Dr. McAfee

You start, you deal with the healthcare system, you begin to say there's gotta be a better way and I know a better way and I need that, I need to be sure that my voice is heard. So you've start at the county society level and I was president of the county society. Then you go onto the state level and I was president of the State Association. Then I became the delegate to the AMA. Dan Hanley sent me. Their alternate delegate when he was sick. Dick Laney from Skowhegan, He said, I'm going to send you in his place. You, you're bitching all the time, you go ahead and fix things up and go down there. So I said, okay, I'll do it. So I went and the first meeting I was just so impressed with the fact that one person standing up in the house of delegates saying something could turn that entire organization in another direction if he or she was right.

Diane narration

In 1984, he decided to run for a seat on the AMA's Board of Trustees. He won and served three terms. In 1994 he was elected president, the first and only doctor from Maine to be elected president of the American Medical Association since it was founded in 1847.

Dr. McAfee

When I won, they invite you down front with your wife to accept the accolades of the house and give a little thank you speech. And uh, I said never in my wildest dreams could I imagine that I'd be president of the

AMA. I said, but then again in my wildest dreams, I rarely think of the AMA. That made the newspapers, that made the wire service.

Diane

What did you accomplish in your role with the AMA that you're most proud of?

Dr. McAfee

Yeah. I used the theme family violence. The AMA hadn't looked upon violence, particularly family violence as a public health problem. It's a crime. We accept that it's a crime for the legal profession to deal with. I said, no, those patients are in our offices, in our clinics and emergency ward every single day. Why don't we have a more organized plan to deal with these, particularly how to alert doctors to how to pick up on violence, how to screen for it, how to refer for it, etc. And, uh, I think my greatest legacy that I'm , you know, have you had an examination recently by a doctor? Did they ask you about violence in your home? Do you feel safe in your house?

Diane

Do you feel safe in your home?

Dr. McAfee

Yeah, that's my legacy. That's right.

Diane narration

But it's not his only legacy. When his tenure as president of the AMA ended, he turned his focus to his home state of Maine.

Dr. McAfee

Most of my time has been spent at University of New England. Yeah. I accepted appointment to a board of trustees right after I finished with AMA. They gave me an honorary degree. At the same time they gave and honorary degree to the head of the Osteopathic Association, who was a good friend of mine from Rhode Island, Larry Bouchard, and we both were

trustees together. But I get very much interested in in saying it's time to stop any animosity we have between DOs and MDs in this community. If one looks at the primary care training of doctors now, the vast majority are in the DO field and they're going out and populate the state of Maine. MDs listen to where your referral sources are coming from. Here's where we need to come together as a unified profession and so I said I'm going to work to help them. Once we got started, we said we need a pharmacy school. We don't have a pharmacy school in northern New England. So we brought together all the, a major chains, cvs and Costco and Walgreens, you know, there's, and they all agreed to kick in some money. In addition to that, we did, we built a brand new dental school. We expanded the medical school from a hundred to 175 doctors a year. The College of Health Professions has similarly expanded, with 200 graduates a year. So this past year we had 52 new dentists, 82 pharmacists, 175 doctors and over 200 people in nurse anesthesia, AOT, PT, dental hygiene, et cetera. We're the largest supplier of health manpower in northern New England, if not all of New England. I can't think of a better way for me to have spent my time. I got, they named me a trustee emeritus when I finished my regular trustee.

Diane

Means you're there forever.

Dr. McAfee

And it means you're there forever if you want to go. You don't vote. But they made me chairman of the Advancement Committee for this last capital campaign so that I came in, we raised, they said please get us 40 million and got 62 million. And I was pleased with that.

Diane

So you, you are not retired. You don't, I mean like you don't earn an income anymore. Oh, retired from life by any mean?

Dr. McAfee

No.

Diane

And you have no intention?

Dr. McAfee

No.

Diane narration

He has been appointed to one position after another — by every Maine governor but Paul LePage since John Reed in the 60s. If Maine's current governor, Janet Mills, were to ask him to do something, he'd probably say yes. He's always eager to participate, but he has noticed that his body has started to slow down a bit.

Dr. McAfee

I think I hit a wall around 79, 80. I could do anything. I could take care of my property, rake leaves, mow the lawn, shovel snow. And I had no problem doing any of these things. We have a small cottage up at Forest Lake, maintain that place, put the boat in every year, et cetera. Beginning about age 80 for me, things started to bother me. My back, my balance, my sleeping, my physical strength and I started developing sarcopenia, which is a loss of muscle mass and that you have, simply by sitting a lot and not doing as much, et cetera. And as a consequence, I've, I have a lot more empathy for people who need help getting in and out of a chair and automobile, uh, going up and downstairs.

Diane

Do you accept help readily from other people?

Dr. McAfee

I have begun recently to do so. Yeah.

Diane

It's something that you might not have been so easy to years ago?

Dr. McAfee

Yeah. Right. Absolutely. Yeah. And, and not a lot, but occasionally if, rare instances, but I can see the need in the future for doing, doing so.

Diane

Do you ever act in a certain way that will sort of influence how people see you? Like might you feel weak but you refuse to let people know about it?

Dr. McAfee

Yeah, yeah, yeah. You hide it.

Diane

And how do you hide it and why?

Dr. McAfee

Well, you try and do things a little faster than you should. Family won't let me get on ladders anymore, which is probably a wise thing. I can't go up and clean my roof and gutters the way I used to. So I hire people to do this now, which that bothers me to have to do that. But nonetheless, I realize time has come for that to happen.

Diane

So it's, it's hard sometimes to accept those kinds of changes?

Dr. McAfee

It is, it is, but when you say 84 it is not as hard, you know, I never thought that was very old and I think it is kind of old.

Diane

Do you have a goal to live, to be a certain age?

Dr. McAfee

My mother lived to be 102. Dad died in his seventies. I'm, I don't have any desire to live to a number if, if the function isn't, uh, isn't there.

Diane

You enjoy life, don't you?

Dr. McAfee

I do. The Red Sox won yesterday, the Bruins won yesterday in overtime. I had to stay up until both of those things were finished. Uh, they're not going to play tonight kind of rain. I'm sure I'm going to look just the same. Uh, I like to watch the sports stations. Sports take my time, I think.

Diane

What do you appreciate most about your social life?

Dr. McAfee

My wife and I have season tickets to the Portland Stage and I'm glad we do it that way because it makes us go. We have season tickets to Brunswick in the summer of the musicals. I go to every show at Saco River. We're going out there tonight. That keeps us busy cause we go to dinner first and then we go to the show and then we know, at least that's part of our thing.

Diane

What makes it a good day for you?

Dr. McAfee

Sun. No, I'm trying to make it a good day.

Diane

I'm here!

Dr. McAfee

You brighten up my day. Every day's a good day. If it isn't you, can't you gotta make it a good day.

Diane

I'm guessing you don't ever feel lonely.

Dr. McAfee

No, but I will tell you that I have become interested in loneliness. There are only five things that influence how long and how well you live — genetics, and few of us can choose our parents wisely. Two is the environment. Took us a long time to realize the importance of clean air, clean water and everything else. Three is social circumstance. If you're unemployed, if you're poor, if you're living in the attic, inadequate housing or no housing, and recently if you're lonely, it's a given that your health is worse. That loneliness was brought to us by Surgeon General Murthy, the previous Surgeon General, saying it's important enough for you all to be aware about loneliness. So ask about loneliness when a patient comes here, be aware that when that patient has lost a spouse, that the next six months is a terrible time and it may account for the absence of taking medication, the failure to get the prescriptions, all those things. Uh, the fourth is medical care that you're going to receive. But it's surprising to me to realize that only about 10% of the determination of how well and how long you live is because of your medical care. But the fifth factor responsible for half of how well and how long you'll live is personal behavior and if you abuse yourself, smoke, drink, use drugs, lack of exercise, it's a given that your health is going to be less. So yes, loneliness is an important social factor in the determination of how well and how long you live.

Diane

Do you have any advice or words of wisdom that you haven't already shared for people?

Dr. McAfee

Enjoy life. Every day there's so many opportunities to give and by so giving you do enjoy life more. Uh, think of your children and grandchildren and how you can make this world a better place for them. Think of your neighbors. just be grateful that you're alive and that your health allows you to live as long as you have.

Diane

Is there something you would like people to know about you?

Dr. McAfee

He was a good doctor. My head stone, he was a good doctor. I can't think of any other accolade and I've received a lot. He was a good doctor.

Diane narration

And because he is a good doctor, he felt it was important to write an Op Ed in the Portland Press Herald recently expressing his concern about declining vaccination rates.

Dr. McAfee

I've asked people why they don't do it. There's one theme that comes through the bugs me a great deal and that's that they no longer have the faith and trust in their doctor or the medical profession because of bad actors, doctors writing prescriptions for opioids for money, wrong side of issues like abortion and other things. Um, dishonesty by one which taints the entire profession. And we've got to work on that cause that's problem.

Diane narration

You've been listening to Conversations About Aging, a Catching Health podcast. I'm Diane Atwood. To learn more about Dr. McAfee's contributions, to listen to other conversations about aging and to read my blog posts on health and wellness visit CatchingHealth.com.

This podcast was made possible by our sponsors Avita of Stroudwater, a memory care facility, and Stroudwater Lodge, an assisted living community, both in Westbrook, Maine. You'll find out more about them at northbridgecos.com.

A shout out to Smith Atwood Video Services for editing the podcast. See what else they have to offer at SmithAtwood.com.

And I'd also like to thank Tom Meuser for his support. He's Director of the Center for Excellence in Aging and Health at the University of New England. Tom will be using some of the interviews for research on aging issues in Maine.