

# Dr. Roger Gollub: The Finest Man I Will Ever Know

In Loving Memory, July 31, 1955 - Nov. 19, 2008

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By Rudy Owens

Dr. Roger Gollub, one of Alaska's most respected citizens and one the United States' most skilled and devoted pediatricians, died on Nov. 19, 2008, near Kotzebue, Ak. He was seeing patients over a three-day period and doing what he did best as a doctor. About four miles from town on his first-ever mushing expedition with a coworker and local musher, Tracy Schaeffer, Roger and the sled team were struck from behind by a snow machine being operated by a driver, who was confirmed by toxicology tests to have been under the influence of drugs *and* alcohol. Schaeffer was seriously injured and was medevaced to Anchorage. She was in critical condition and then had to undergo a lengthy recovery, at great personal and emotional cost to her and her family.

On Feb. 1, 2011, a jury in Kotzebue, Ak., ruled that Roger's killer was guilty of manslaughter (felony), assault 1 (felony), and DUI (still a misdemeanor in Alaska). The judge, Ben Esch, threw out a charge of murder 2 (felony), which many followers of the case found disconcerting given the circumstances of this horrific crime. On May 18, 2011, the killer received a sentence of 11 years for manslaughter, 9 years for assault-1st degree, and 5 years of a suspended sentence, plus a fine of nearly \$450,000 for restitution. The trial was delayed to 26 months after the crime due to what I perceived to be repeated and insulting judicial missteps, failures by the prosecution to prioritize this case properly, and a hostile defense counsel who was soundly rejected by the Kotzebue jurors. The Alaska Office of Victims Rights made a difference in this case for the victims' families.

This remains a very personal loss to me. I am absolutely shocked this could have happened to perhaps the finest man I have had the rarest of privilege of knowing and calling a true friend. However, since Roger's passing, I became an EMT, in order to respond to the types of accidents in Alaska that claimed Roger, but also to honor's Roger's life work of helping others in need.



Roger Gollub holds his prize catch following a successful salmon fishing excursion. The former University City, Mo., resident loved Alaska and embraced its traditions and especially the Native community he tirelessly served throughout his distinguished career in the public health service.



Roger Gollub and Rudy Owens celebrate a successful halibut charter on the Homer Spit in May 2007.

Roger was my next door neighbor from University City, Mo., where we both grew up. It was and remains an integrated community. At University City High School, you had to be tough to earn respect, and have smarts to make your mark. Roger did that with ease, graduating in 1973 as class valedictorian and as the captain of the school's accomplished track team. He was 10 years older than me. He was a giant to me then, though he barely stood

5'5". I grew up wanting to be a man like Roger Gollub, or maybe even half the man that he was, every day of his life.

It was simply impossible not to admire Roger. A national class runner, Roger graduated from Yale University and then the medical school of Johns Hopkins University. Out of the lab and classes, he made his mark with record-holding distances in the Northeast and later running marathons. Oh, and he also became an advanced ham radio operator on the side, a passion he carried throughout his full life, including in Alaska with the Anchorage Amateur Radio Club. He then went on to a life that was among the most rewarding I have known about, ever, as he made this world a better place by helping others.

Above all, Roger was a truly committed and loving husband and father. His professional reputation stretched across the United States and beyond. Most will remember Roger as a first-rate care provider who was in the profession to heal pain and help others, particularly those in need. He was a pediatrician who devoted his life to serving children. He had a long and illustrious career in the Indian Health Service, working with Native children and families, and for his excellent work, he received national recognition as one of the finest pediatricians in the entire country. He worked in New Mexico

and then Alaska, where he moved with his lovely family (wife and two beautiful, intelligent, spirited daughters). He fell in love with the great land, and he embraced its rich traditions and vitality with the truest northern spirit.

He gave 120 percent of himself to Alaska's Native community nearly every day he was there, in Alaska. His patients had a doctor who would go the extra mile and who practiced medicine that has all but been extinguished in our broken health care system. His patients and coworkers sang his praises that most of us believe only exist in fiction.

Dozens of anecdotes and personal stories about Roger's humble greatness were shared in the local newspaper soon after his passing. Here is just one: *Dr. Roger was a funny, compassionate, dedicated and highly skilled man who used his Johns Hopkins degree not for making money, but to provide medical care for American Indians and Alaska Natives. For seven years he's cared for countless children at the Alaska Native Medical Center, fascinating them with bird-call gadgets and SpongeBob Squarepants toys and reassuring worried moms and dads with his expert*



Roger and his beloved golden retriever, Sophie, by the Balto statue in downtown Anchorage.

*treatment of their kids. He tirelessly volunteered his medical services and was probably in Kotzebue to help the Maniilaq clinic, despite recently retiring. He worked for IHS in New Mexico before moving to Anchorage and delving enthusiastically into as many outdoor activities as he could. Dr. Roger was the friendliest, most optimistic person we ever had the privilege to know... What a tragedy to lose such a stellar person in this way. We'll miss him so much.*

Alaska has lost a flame that burned bright every day of a magnificent, full life. We have lost someone who made Alaska and the country a better place for everyone. We may never even truly understand the unfathomable meaning of Roger's passing, particularly from such a terrible tragedy. I know Roger is probably smiling his contagious smile, as he looks down on us as we take full stock of his amazing life. Roger, my good friend, I salute you. We are better because you were here. We honor the gentleness of your touch, the grizzly size heart you had for the kids you treated so well, and the love that you have left in your wake. Thank you for everything.