

Dr. John Shea Presents his Professional Papers to the Memphis Public Library



Dr. John Shea recently donated 406 papers, including more than 300 published articles, to the Memphis Public Library's Memphis Room. The papers document and demonstrate the legacy of a man whose work revolutionized modern medicine.

Throughout the course of his life, Dr. John Shea Jr. has made major historical breakthroughs and advancements in medicine. Recently, Shea donated 406 papers, including more than 300 published articles, to the Memphis Public Library's Memphis Room that reflect the breadth of his work and perfection of his craft along the way. The library is thrilled to have his entire professional work — papers he has written that document and demonstrate the legacy of a man whose work has revolutionized modern medicine.

Shea is known for having made the first successful reconstructive stapedectomy in May 1956. His patient was a housewife who had suffered progressive hearing loss that rendered even her hearing aid useless. Because of Shea's procedure, the 54-year-old woman completely regained her hearing. The actual surgery included removal of the diseased stapes, the covering of the oval window utilizing a vein graft from the back of the patient's hand and the insertion of a teflon prosthesis (pioneered by Shea) to replace the defective bone in her ear. With the success of stapedectomy, Shea became an overnight sensation in the medical world and propelled his lifetime work to advance the treatment of hearing loss, dizziness and other ear disease.

It is no wonder that in 1962 Dr. Shea was featured on the cover of Life magazine as one of five remarkable achievers who were part of what the magazine called "The Takeover

Generation.” The article described these individuals as tough and having a self-imposed standard of individual excellence; a zest for hard work; a loathing for mediocrity and the courage to try new ideas; they were filled with purpose and thought on a scale that often scared the establishment. It was this personality and these characteristics that prompted him to ask his wife for her hand in marriage on their very first date. The former Miss America, Lynda Lee Mead, said “yes” and they have been together for 48 years.

At the top of his class at Notre Dame, Shea went on to Harvard Medical School, where he graduated with honors in 1947. He was in the middle of performing his residency in Boston at the renowned Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary, and was called up to serve in the Naval Medical Corps during the Korean War. He said his experience in the Korean War is one he will never forget as he had the opportunity to perform many complicated procedures while serving his country. Sadly, he was three months shy of completing his tour of duty when his father, himself a well respected otolaryngologist, died of cancer and thwarted the younger Shea’s lifelong dream of practicing with him. He recalls his father saying, “to compete, you have to have a Northeastern education.” He remembered his father’s words, and after completing his medical training in Boston, he moved on to further study otology abroad in Germany, Austria and Switzerland.

Upon his return to Memphis, Shea took over his father’s practice and moved into the Memphis Eye and Ear Hospital located at Jefferson and Pauline. He later purchased land in East Memphis where he built the Shea Ear Clinic and Ambulatory Surgery Center, which opened in 1985 at the corner of Poplar and Ridgeway. Ever the visionary, this state of the art facility was one of the first outpatient surgery centers to open in the United States. Shea built a hotel next to his clinic that has a crosswalk joining the two facilities. To this day, patients come from all over the world for ear operations pioneered by Shea and performed by his associates. They are literally wheeled from the recovery room to their hotel room after their surgery and cared for by family members until their post-operation check-up the following morning. Shea’s incorporation of an ambulatory surgery center as a part of his practice made a difference in his patients’ recovery process, and he notes that he was ahead of his time when he first introduced the concept to Memphis and to the world.

Shea has five children, two of whom have followed in his footsteps. John III and Paul are also otologists. John III is in private practice, and Paul is set to take the reins of Shea Ear Clinic and continue the legacy started three generations before in Memphis.

Shea prides himself on the education he received at Christian Brothers, Notre Dame, Harvard, and in Europe. After the first successful stapedectomy, he became famous all over the world, and he notes now, "It was quite remarkable for someone my (young) age. Every ear doctor came to Memphis to see my work and I've also traveled the world teaching my discoveries."

Now, after retiring from active practice in April 2011, Shea is sharing his "entire life's work" with Memphis and the world by donating his manuscripts and journal articles to the Library, where they will be available for researchers and medical historians to study. These publications span a period of 1949-2003 and reflect collaboration with his father in the beginning, and ending with Shea co-authoring a chapter in a book titled "Surgery of the Ear" with his son, Paul Shea.

"We are tremendously honored that Dr. Shea wanted to share these papers with the Memphis community and world at large. Dr. Shea's legacy will live on forever as a result of his generosity and the meticulous records he has provided for public viewing," said Keenon McCloy, director of the Memphis Public Library and Information Center.

According to Wayne Dowdy, Senior Manager of the History and Social Services Department, Shea's papers will be housed in the Memphis/Shelby County Room on the fourth floor of the Benjamin L. Hooks Central Library.

Stephanie Nerissa White is director of communications for Memphis Public Library Information Center.