



## “I’m Just Showing Christ’s Love in a Small Region of The World”

For 40+ years, Dick Withington, M.D., '62 has been aiding those on land and on the water as a first responder in New York's Thousand Islands

BY LORI FERGUSON

It was January 2021 when the call came in: A man walking his dogs discovered two men unconscious on a nearby northern New York snowmobile trail, and they looked to be in bad shape. Dick Withington, M.D., '62 was en route to the first exam in his current EMT recertification and responded on the fly: “I’m familiar with the area where they’d been found and knew it wasn’t easily accessible to the ambulance, so I headed in. Fortunately, after serving as a first responder all

these years, I’ve learned to always be prepared, so I had everything with me that I needed – a jackknife, a flashlight and a rescue sled.”

Once onsite, the 80-year-old orthopedic surgeon and longtime EMT helped to stabilize the men and get them on their way to the hospital, then continued on to his class. “It was a good evening. They both survived, and while I was late arriving, I made it in time to complete my exam, although I didn’t do as well as I should have,” he confesses with a soft chuckle.

It’s difficult to gin up much concern over Withington’s less-than-perfect score. After working as an EMT for more than 40 years and even longer as an orthopedic surgeon, it’s a safe bet that he’s forgotten more about the practice of medicine than many will ever know.

### A LIFELONG PASSION

Withington’s enthusiasm for medicine stretches back to childhood. His father, Lawrence, also a physician, was a beloved role model.

“He made house calls as an old-fashioned ‘country doctor,’” Withington says. “He was honored for making calls

on skis during heavy winter conditions, and he did not remove his snowshoes from his car until age 80. He was the legend, I just try to follow his lead.

“My father was and is my spiritual guide,” he continues. “He wasn’t Catholic, but he was more Christian than anyone else I know. He died just short of his 105th birthday and led his household until his final days.”

Withington’s dedication to rescue work is likewise born of personal experience. As a teenager, he and a group of friends were involved in a mountaineering accident that nearly cost him his life. “I was terrified – in way over my head – and I had an epiphany,” he recalls. “I said to God, ‘If you can get me out of this mess, I will spend the rest of my life helping others.’ And He did, so I have.”

After majoring in biology at Holy Cross, Withington completed medical school at Columbia University and his orthopedic surgery residency at Dartmouth. He joined an orthopedic practice in northern New York’s Jefferson County, where supplemental shifts in the emergency room quickly revealed an additional outlet for his skills and interests. Studying patients as

Whether he’s on the St. Lawrence River offering aid, trimming trees for neighbors or making friends with wildlife (“You are never closer to God than when a chickadee lands on your hand,” he notes), Dick Withington, M.D., '62 finds joy in helping others.

they arrived in the hospital, Withington realized that the best outcomes sprang from the help people received between the time they were hurt and when they reached the hospital. He joined the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons’ efforts to lead courses in EMT certification and before long he was at the other end of the learning process.

“I sought my first EMT certification in 1971, shortly after becoming a doctor, and two years later, witnessed the passage of the EMS Services Development Act, which led to the development of a comprehensive Emergency Medical System (EMS) throughout the country,” he explains.

In 1979, the Withington family moved to Clayton, New York, a tiny town on the state’s northern boundary, just a stone’s throw from Canada. They settled on Round Island, a member of the Thousand Islands chain that nestles in a 40-mile stretch of the St. Lawrence River on the U.S./Canada border. Cognizant of their distance from fire and medical personnel and concerned about the

safety of his family and other island residents, Withington asked the local fire department whether it would be willing to modify its fireboat to accommodate EMS victims. The department agreed and worked with Withington to secure a \$2,000 federal grant to retrofit the boat. They insisted, however, that if Withington were to have a say in how the funds were spent, he must become an active member of the fire department. He agreed, little knowing that he was embarking on a journey that would later lead to his recognition as Clayton’s Citizen of the Year and, perhaps, its longest-serving EMT.

### A DIVERSE RESUMÉ

In the decades since, Withington has assisted with countless rescues in and around the Thousand Islands and helped to advance the EMS program in myriad ways. He remains a steadfast member and ardent promoter. “Given the distances and time involved, EMS in the wilderness setting requires training and experience,” he notes. “It is often necessary to involve the U.S. Coast Guard, law enforcement and other civil

authorities. Being a first responder is never a solo endeavor; I just enjoy being part of the team.”

Area residents also play a key role: “We have the support of a wonderful community,” he enthuses. “Thanks to their generosity, we recently purchased a new fireboat, Last Chance, which rivals those found in major metropolitan areas. In fact, I believe our new boat may be the only licensed marine ambulance in the U.S.,” he notes proudly.

But Withington doesn’t content himself with rescue work. He also works as an amateur arborist, trimming trees for friends and neighbors in the area. “I still climb and do the rigging,” he notes. “My orthopedic training proves handy when it comes to setting up traction and pulleys, and both skillsets fit in nicely with the technical aspects of rescue work.” He also maintains his master mariner license, the highest grade of seafarer qualification, which permits him to operate a ship of any tonnage or power. “I taught all three of my kids to boat when they were young, and now my eldest son is a Seaway pilot who takes ocean-going ships through the islands of the St. Lawrence Seaway,” he says. “If there’s an emergency on the water, he’s often the first to know and I’m the second. We communicate and cooperate in incidents involving shipping, light-salvage, rescue and security.” And whenever possible, Withington accompanies his son on salvage missions: “The Coast Guard likes knowing that there’s a second licensed captain on board, and the fact that I’m a doctor is icing on the cake.”

Despite this multitude of talents, Withington is exceedingly modest about his accomplishments. “The class of 1962 produced a number of high-quality physicians,” he demurs. “Tony Fauci, who’s pretty well known these days, is a friend. And Jim Murphy received the College’s Sanctae Crucis Award for his amazing work in Ghana. I’m just showing Christ’s love in a small region of the world because I thought people would appreciate it.” >>>

While the work of first responder is hardly a solo endeavor of professionals, the role also requires the understanding of loved ones. “I couldn’t have pursued this work without the support of my family,” he says. Emergencies, by their nature, can happen any time of the day or night, and they frequently pull one away from time with family. For example, in the days before cell phones, he sank hours into establishing a radio network between rescuers in the field and hospital ER staff. “My wife thought I wasted a lot of time,” he concedes with a chuckle. Thankfully, he observes, that aspect of the job has evolved. Now his cellphone is equipped with an app that alerts him to a crisis and sends him the accident site coordinates and directions.

And after more than four decades of service, it’s Withington’s face that many expect to see. “Oftentimes people phone me before they call 911,” he admits. He laughingly remembers a call he received early one Sunday morning from a woman renting a home on one of the islands. “She told me that she had an emergency and needed my help. When I asked what was wrong, she told me her toilet was plugged and she needed a plumber at the house immediately. She said my name and number were posted on the refrigerator door with a note that said, ‘Call in case of emergency.’” Withington acknowledges that after all these years, he’s become something of a fixture in the area. “There’s a running joke in the community that if the refrigerator doesn’t have my name and number posted on the front, you know it’s brand new.”

After numerous winters spent alone at the head of Round Island with only his dogs for company – health concerns sent his late wife, Rosanne, to Florida’s more temperate climate each fall – Withington now winters over on the mainland. It’s safer

that way, he concedes with a tinge of regret in his voice. The series of dogs who kept watch over the family home with him during the long snowy months – Siberian Husky named Stormy, followed by black Lab, Bo, and finally a 130-pound black Lab, Tug – have all passed away, and the winters are long and hard.

Withington has also moved into more of an advisory position with the EMS team. “Nowadays, I focus more on supporting the rescuers on scene, sharing my knowledge and experience from the sidelines,” he explains. “I cherry pick the calls and respond based on need.” For example, he says, if the emergency is back in the woods, out on the ice or over on the islands, he gets involved. “After more than 40 years working these woods and islands, I know the terrain and I’ve seen a lot, so I take part in the thinking and planning around the rescue to make sure everyone gets home safe.”

Asked why, at age 80, he still feels the need to respond at all, Withington pauses, then answers quietly. “I’m keeping my promise to God. When I answered that recent call about the two snowmobilers in distress, I was trudging through the snow, dragging a rescue board behind me, and I could feel my heart rate and blood pressure creeping up where they shouldn’t be. I thought, ‘Dick, this will probably catch up with you at some point.’ But what a great way to go!

“When my parents picked me up at graduation, my dad asked what I thought of the education I received at Holy Cross,” he continues. “I’ll never forget what I told him. I said, ‘They didn’t teach me how to earn a living, but they taught me how to live.’ Holy Cross gave me the opportunity, and it was up to me to take advantage of it. And that’s what I’ve been trying to do every day since.” ■

## Crowley ’95 Turns Life-Altering Event Into Advocacy

BY SANDRA GITTLEN

Christina L. (Mercogliano) Crowley ’95 was enjoying the last stop of a whirlwind family trip to New York City and was attending her second Broadway show of the day when she felt a sharp pain in her head, an involuntary clenching of her hand and a sudden loss of vision. She tried to tell her sister, Theresa Mercogliano ’89, what was happening but couldn’t get the words out. Crowley was having a stroke, but didn’t realize it.

Fast forward three years and Crowley has turned that experience into advocacy as the 2021 chair of the American Heart Association’s (AHA) Go Red for Women Boston campaign, which has the dual purpose of raising awareness about women’s heart health and serving as a catalyst for change to improve the lives of women around the world.

“I had no familiarity with stroke, so I didn’t react quickly,” Crowley says. She notes there are treatments that depend on diagnosis speed to potentially ward off the long-term stroke effects, such as hand numbness, face drooping and intermittent memory loss, all of which Crowley experiences. “I want to help other people not only know the signs of stroke, but also be able to advocate for themselves when seeking medical care.”

Nearly half of all U.S. adults have some form of cardiovascular disease, and heart disease is the leading cause of death in women. Heart disease and stroke cause 1 in 3 deaths among women each year – more than all cancers combined, according to the AHA, which notes that 80% of cardiac

and stroke events may be prevented with education and action.

### WISHING SHE KNEW

Crowley delayed seeking immediate care and leaving the theatre because she didn’t want to ruin the evening for her family, including her daughter and niece. “We all had so much excitement about going to the show,” she says. “However, had I thought I was having a heart attack, I would have gone to the hospital sooner.”

When she did go to a New York ER later that night, she was initially diagnosed with a complex migraine. After being in the hospital for a week, later scans revealed telltale signs of a stroke and a hole in her heart – patent ovale formale, a congenital birth defect. She underwent surgery to close the hole and reduce the incidence of strokes, and took just two weeks off from her role as senior vice president at Dell Technologies. True to Crowley’s nature, as soon as she got out of the hospital she was back at work.

Once Crowley returned to the office, “I worked hard to make sure no one would know I had a stroke,” she says. However, intense headaches cut her workday short, sending the mom of three to bed early. Her leaders, executive assistant and sales team all helped her deal with the aftereffects, including encouraging her to bow out of after-hours commitments early so she could get to sleep and ward off headaches. “I didn’t want special accommodations because I didn’t want to appear weak, but I guess I needed them and I was lucky that my team protected me,” she says.

It was through Dell philanthropy that Crowley crossed paths with the AHA. “I was on an AHA panel with a cardiologist, telling my story, and she kept underscoring what I said with, ‘Don’t



do that,’ as in ‘Don’t wait to go to the hospital’ and ‘Don’t rush back to work,’” she laughs. Soon after, the AHA asked her to be its 2021 Go Red for Women Boston chair. “[Until then,] I didn’t hear about women having heart attacks in my personal life and I wasn’t aware that heart disease and stroke are the No. 1 and No. 3 killers of women,” she says, calling the first days with the AHA “eye-opening.”

### USING HER EXPERIENCE TO HELP OTHERS

An economics/accounting major at Holy Cross, Crowley says she took the Jesuit spirit of “men and women for and with others” seriously, considering it an extension of what her parents taught her. While at Mount St. James, she participated in community outreach with Best Buddies and the Purple Key Society. “We are expected as Catholics to take the blessings and talents we receive from God and bring them to others,” she says. (Holy Cross is also where she also met husband, David Crowley ’93.)

Crowley also is helping the AHA deal with

the effects of the pandemic. Normally the organization would hold in-person classes to help families learn infant CPR. While that is not possible due to COVID-19 restrictions, Crowley is helping to raise money to send kits to parents so they can learn the life-saving skills at home.

Aside from AHA fundraising – the organization is a leading fundraiser for heart disease and stroke research – Crowley tapped Dell’s technology and business talent to create an AHA program to help young female students in Boston learn about STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) education and careers. “This STEM program ties together my passions for community outreach and education of young women,” she notes.

For many, such a startling life event would make them pause, but Crowley is managing it a different way: “My life lesson from having a stroke wasn’t to slow down, it was being grateful for what I have and giving back.” ■