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Doctor marks a century of selflessness

After a lifetime in the medical trenches, Marshall Philip Welles now dispenses care and concern where needed.

By Cecilia Rasmussen, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
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Centenarians were rare in 1907, when Marshall Philip Welles was born.

More people live to be 100 these days, but Welles still stands apart.

For starters, he holds a valid California driver's license -- one of 183 people in his age group who do. In 2002, just 58 people 100 or older held a license.

"I like the freeways better than the streets," Welles said in an interview. "Cars are coming at you from all directions on the streets, but only one direction on the freeway. I never go over 70 mph."

The retired physician drives to seminars to keep up with medical advances, even though he gave up his practice in 1991. And twice a month, he helps at cancer support groups.

"Since I retired in 1991 and quit paying malpractice insurance at age 84, I give no advice, only love and concern," he said.

At home in Duarte, he's writing his autobiography. It's 80% finished, he says, and measures 400 pages in his computer.

"He was always meticulous in detail and record-keeping," said Glen Dawson, retired owner of the landmark Dawson's Bookstore in Larchmont Village. The men met decades ago at Pasadena's Lake Avenue Church, where they organized an adult Bible study class and encouraged missionary work.

To celebrate his 55-year career in missionary work and medicine, and to pay

tribute to his longevity -- which he attributes to genes, diet, exercise and mental stimulation -- Welles organized and paid for his own 100th birthday party two weeks ago at Westminster Gardens, a Christian retirement community in Duarte.

There, about 350 people -- medical colleagues, local reporters, Duarte city officials, schoolchildren, residents and Welles' family -- gathered to honor him. Filipino, Thai and Chinese dancers -- representing the three countries he worked in -- entertained the crowd. A granddaughter showed highlights of his life on a 20-minute DVD titled "My First 100 Years."

"He always divided his life into three parts: preparation, missionary work and retirement," said Dawson, who attended the party.

During Welles' career, he delivered nearly 1,400 babies and traveled to 84 countries on several continents. He spent more than 30 years working abroad, first in China and later in Thailand, where he helped to build the Bangkok Christian Hospital -- now a 160-bed medical center. He also practiced medicine while confined to a Japanese POW camp in the Philippines during World War II.

Welles, born in Los Angeles, was an only child. His mother died of tuberculosis when he was 4. His father remarried and later moved the family to Pasadena.

It was there that Welles felt his lifelong calling. "At age 7, I knew I wanted to be a missionary," he said.

In February 1914, the news arrived that a family friend, the Rev. Tom Hannay, had died of typhoid fever in Kenya.

"I told my parents then, 'I'm going to Africa to take Tom Hannay's place.' "

His stepmother encouraged his missionary goal, and his life's path was set.

The Bible was the first important book in his life, he said. He got the other in seventh grade, when his teacher handed him a physiology text. It would be his medical Bible.

A pharmacy degree from what is now Oregon State University led him to medical school.

During the Depression, he attended Rush Medical College in Chicago. His future bride, Helen Antisdale, went to nursing school in nearby Evanston. They'd met at Bible school in Pasadena when he was an undergrad.

"We made a seven-year commitment to each other," Welles said. "But the only thing I could afford was her train fare into Chicago to see me once a week."

After he earned a medical degree in 1934, Welles returned to Pasadena. The couple married the next year.

He was an intern in the contagious disease ward of Los Angeles County General Hospital when a polio outbreak hit. More than 2,500 cases were isolated at the newly built hospital.

"It was a nightmare," Welles said. "People waited up to 18 hours to see a doctor. They spent the night in their cars" outside.

More than 200 of the hospital staff came down with the disease too, but Welles was spared.

In 1937, when the couple's first child, Robert Marshall, was a year old, the family headed to a small village outside Beijing, where Welles served as a medical missionary. Within months, Japan invaded China.

As war raged around them, hundreds of soldiers and farmers "were delivered to the tiny clinic in wheelbarrows and litters," Welles said.

The Welleses' second son, Richard Philip, was born Christmas Day 1940. Less than two months later, the family fled for safety to Luzon Island in the Philippines, only to be rounded up by the Japanese and imprisoned there with 200 missionaries and 300 other U.S. civilians.

"We were given little food or water," Welles said, "maybe 600 calories a day, and bedded down on a dirt floor."

The Welleses were separated for more than three years within the same camp. "My wife took Richard and I took Bob," Welles said.

Welles worked in the camp clinic and, at great risk, stood up to the Japanese and demanded more food for the children, he said. Adult-size portions of rice were soon served to children 2 and older.

"It was because we minded our Ps and Qs," Welles said. Those who misbehaved were "strung up by their thumbs."

In late 1944, the Welles family and other POWs were transferred to an old prison in Manila, where they remained until their liberation. On Feb. 7, 1945, Gen. Douglas MacArthur visited the prison to shake everyone's hand. By then the formerly 160-pound Welles had shrunk to 120.

The family returned to California on a troop ship with 3,000 soldiers. During the voyage, Welles wandered down to sick bay to witness miracles:

"It was my first introduction to penicillin, as an observer," he said. The drug had been introduced a few years earlier.

By 1947, Welles and his family were on their way back to China with a new baby, Patricia. Within two years, Mao Tse-tung's struggle for power forced them to flee to Bangkok.

"It took me eight years to learn the language there," Welles said, but his study proved worthwhile: He spent nearly a quarter-century in Thailand.

In 1972, Welles, by then 65, retired from missionary work, returning to Pasadena with his wife.

But retirement didn't last long. To pay for the first house he ever owned, he started a family practice, working 60-hour weeks at what was then the Ross-Loos Medical Clinic in Temple City. He also signed on as medical director -- for \$1 a year -- at Westminster Gardens, where the couple moved in 1998. Helen died of congestive heart failure at 93 in 2002.

Hidden from the hubbub of traffic and commerce in the shadow of the San Gabriel Mountains, the 32-acre Westminster Gardens is no ordinary retirement home. About a third of the 155 residents are former missionaries like Welles, each brimming with often-heroic stories about how they survived wars, built schools and churches, and learned about foreign cultures.

"We're a hardy bunch," said Welles, who takes daily walks around the grounds without the use of a cane and walks one mile every day on a treadmill in his bedroom.

The Philadelphia-based Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) purchased the site in 1950 with a \$1-million gift from a Chinese businessman who had attended a Presbyterian mission school in China. Originally intended just for missionaries who had worked on foreign soil, Westminster Gardens was eventually opened to others.

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