

In an interview, a former patient described Dr. Richard C. Christensen as the embodiment of unconditional love. Tragically, his life was cut short in November 2015 when he was hit by a motor vehicle while out for a morning run. On that fateful day, he was doing what he did best – serving others. He had traveled to the nation of Zambia to help build homes with Habitat for Humanity International. Closer to home, Dr. C., as he was affectionately known by many, worked in underserved communities in Florida. His community psychiatry practice took him out of the clinic and onto the streets, where he cared for people with mental illness who were homeless. “He was incredibly compassionate, and he dedicated his work and his life and his career to taking care of the homeless,” said Dr. Jacqueline Hobbs, Vice Chair for Education in the UF Department of Psychiatry. “I always say he’s an angel. He was just an amazing human being, and I miss him terribly.”

A pioneer of “street psychiatry,” Dr. Christensen worked at Jacksonville’s Sulzbacher Center, which provides services for people who are homeless or at risk of becoming so. There he served as director of Behavioral Health Services and worked on the “HOPE team,” riding around town so he could treat people where they were. He was the medical director for a federally funded initiative to treat people who were chronically homeless and who had co-occurring disorders, and he also developed an integrated psychiatry-primary care initiative based at UF Health. An accomplished teacher, he was a professor of psychiatry in the UF Department of Psychiatry, twice – in 1996, and posthumously in 2016 – earning the Hippocratic Award conferred by UF College of Medicine graduating students to a faculty member who, to them, represents the ideals of what a physician should be. Dr. Christensen also earned the UF College of Medicine Exemplary Teacher Award in 2011, 2012 and 2013. He was a prolific researcher, publishing more than 100 peer-reviewed articles, book chapters and reviews.

His legacy continues through numerous projects and community service initiatives organized by coalitions of family members and friends, as well as former students and colleagues from the University of Florida and the Sulzbacher Center. The Christensen Memorial Project, established by the UF Psychiatry Department under the leadership of the Chair, Dr. Regina Bussing, has launched a three-pronged effort in Dr. Christensen’s honor to showcase, through his life and work, the importance of having compassion, serving the underserved through psychiatry, and ministering to people who are homeless.

This work is supervised by the Christensen Editorial Board: Dr. Regina Bussing, Priscilla Spence, Dr. Jacqueline Hobbs, Dr. Dawn-Christi Bruijnzeel, Dr. Ana Thomas Turner, Dr. Josepha Cheong, Dr. Cara Yergen, Dr. Robert Averbuch, Kathy Christensen, Dr. Louis Solomon, and Tory Wilcox.

The project’s components are (1) a compilation of nuggets of wisdom from Dr. Christensen in a booklet called the “Christensen Pearls, (2) a model medical ethics curriculum, and (3) a teaching website. The “Christensen Pearls,” a pocketbook created and released in Summer 2016, pulls together learning aids Dr. C. created for medical students and published. The book contains short articles with helpful mnemonic devices and a table of psychiatric medications started by Dr. Christensen and finished by his former student, Dr. Ana Turner. The book also features

remembrances and artwork created by former patients, alongside warm recollections from former colleagues.

A teaching website with a launch date of Summer 2018 will serve as a living repository of Dr. Christensen's work. The site will be interactive and constantly updated with information that will be of value to patients, students, faculty and the general public. The focus will be on Dr. Christensen's vast body of work, with the published articles organized according to theme. "Anyone who knew Dr. Christensen remains transformed by the heart-to-heart connections he established," Bussing said. "For those who only know of him, our memorial project keeps alive his legacy of caring, advocating and instilling hope."

The model ethics curriculum, completed in 2018, includes Dr. Christensen's writings along with original content from other UF Psychiatry Department faculty. The art featured throughout, a collection of puzzle pieces, were produced by friends, family, and colleagues of Dr. Christensen under the guidance of Maggie Hannon, a recreational therapist, in two workshops. The first workshop took place at the Sulzbacher Center in Jacksonville and the second at Helping Hands Clinic in Gainesville. At the second workshop, musicians Sofia Sirocchi and John Wiegand performed through the Arts in Medicine program. Excerpts from their performance are available online.

Showcased in April 2017 at the Second Annual Christensen Memorial Advocacy Day, these puzzle pieces will continue to be featured in several different physical installments throughout Gainesville and Jacksonville. After this, these pieces will be incorporated into artist Tim Kelly's "Puzzle Project" in New York, New York. More information about Tim Kelly's initiative can be found on this website: http://www.timkellyartist.com/tk_puzzle_about.html

Kathy Christensen, Dr. Christensen's wife, said of the curriculum: "Dick loved to write. He was blessed with that beautiful gift of putting words on paper that would touch your heart and soul. After Dick's death, I was going through some of his works, and was feeling sad to think that his articles would be archived away somewhere and he wouldn't get to publish a book as he talked about in recent years. You can imagine how overjoyed I was at hearing that the Department of Psychiatry would do just that. He was most proud of his academic affiliation and I will always be grateful to University of Florida for this amazing gift of sharing his knowledge and wisdom."

The model ethics curriculum is organized into six modules, with the modules incorporating Dr. Christensen's articles, as well as handouts, vignettes, videos, assessment criteria, and slides. The six modules are "Ethics Terminology," "Slang 'On Board' – A Moral Analysis of Medical Jargon," "Diagnostic Overshadowing," "Relationships with Pharmaceutical Representatives," "Ethical Concerns Regarding the Underserved," and the "Final End of Course Wrap-Up."