



## **Matthias Backer, M.D. '44**

*Obstetrician, Teacher, Naval Officer*

Doctor "Matt" Backer was born in south St. Louis and attended St. Anthony's grade school, St. Louis University High School, Saint Louis University, and Saint Louis University Medical school. A long time member of Our Lady of Providence Parish, he served there as a lector, choir member for 40 years and a member of the school board. He was a "guardian ad litem" for the fetus in litigation against elective abortion, prior to the Roe v. Wade decision.

He was married to Laverne Knapp for 43 years before her death from cancer, and they had 13 children, 11 of whom survive them. Eleven are college graduates, eight with advanced degrees. He has 30 grandchildren and 18 great-grandchildren.

In private practice for 31 years, 21 years with Doctor Raymond Probst, he attended more than 5,000 births, and at different times was chairman of ob-gyn at St. Joseph's, St. Anthony's and Saint Louis University hospitals, and chief of staff at the latter two.

He was a faculty member at Saint Louis University from 1954 to the present, advancing through the ranks from Instructor to Professor and Chairman of the department. He taught in the classroom, the delivery room, the operating room and in his office.

His academic career included considerable clinical research and the publication of numerous papers and articles on medical, social and naval subjects. He lectured by invitation in Australia, China, Ethiopia, Italy, Japan and Puerto Rico and in more than 20 hospitals in the United States, and was an examiner for the American Board of Obstetrics and Gynecology.

His naval career began in 1944 at age 17, and continued for 40 years until retirement in 1984. He rose through the ranks from Hospital Apprentice 2nd class that of Rear Admiral in the medical corps. Much of his navy duty was as a reserve officer while maintaining a private practice and the teaching responsibilities noted above. He was the Navy representative at his medical school from 1957 to 1992, during which time more than 400 students entered the Navy medical corps.

He was honored by his high school (Backer Award), his medical school (service award), the St. Louis Metropolitan Medical Society (leadership award) and the US Navy (Legion of Merit).

In 1997, Matt married Georgia Garrison-Backer BSN, a retired Navy Commander who survives him.

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*[Note: the following eulogy is by son Brian.]*

## Dad Eulogy

### **Thank You:**

Before I get started the Family would like to thank Fr. Craig Holloway and Fr. Ralph Houlihan and clergy. We are honored to have you here today. We truly appreciate Our Lady of Providence for hosting us.

Georgia. It is important that you know that Dad would not have picked you if you were not a special person.

### **ICE Breaker:**

As I get started, Dad is asking, "What is a Spartan doing at a Jr. Billikens Event?". Don't worry Dad, maybe Neil, Kurt or Anne Marie can return the favor someday.

Dad used humor on all occasions.

Dad and Brother Joe liked telling the story of the funeral for the man who wrote the Hokey Pokey. Dad said it took forever to get him into the coffin. You see, they put his left leg in, took his left leg out, put his left leg in ... You get the picture. Afterwards they still didn't know what that was all about!!

I remember talking to Dad about how he is getting into heaven. When Dad arrives, St. Peter is hands him a bright red shirt with big white letters: F-O-L.

Dad asks, "What is F-O-L". St. Peter replies: "Friend Of Laverne. That is the only way you got into Heaven. Shut up and put the shirt on"

Along with mom all our Aunts are Saints. Being a Friend of Helene, Marcella and Jacqueline gets you into heaven as well. Being a Friend of my Sister Lynn moves you to the front of the line.

### **Faith:**

A great way of describing our Dad, in a small amount of time, would be: Faith – Family – Medicine – Navy. These were not separate experiences. They were entwined into one individual / one life. I am confident that every Navy person knew that Dad was a catholic with 13 kids, and an OB/GYN.

Dad received his initial instruction at St. Anthony's grade school. However, his Faith really developed at St. Louis University High School. He was challenged, tested, driven and formed into a catholic young man. He loved his high school and loved telling the affiliation with

George and Anna Backer. It was also at this time he developed a relationship with and high regard for the Jesuits.

Faith is the bedrock for our family. Mom and Dad worked hard to send us to Catholic elementary and high schools. They were founding members of this church

### **Family:**

It is hard to describe the love Dad had for my Mom. They loved traveling together. Not sure why, but they seemed really happy to leave us. 😊 At times Dad could aggravate my mom. He would reply by holding up a fork to his eye. We did not learn until much later this meant, "I am a prisoner of your love".

In a tribute to my mom he said, " ..with the possible exception of Mother Teresa, she was the most selfless woman the Lord ever created".

Dad had his own language. Or what we can call Dadism's. Sometimes this is where he would take body parts and use them in another context. So several times we were sent to our Womb. While these were great for home, they were not appreciated by the Sisters of Providence when we repeated them to our classmates.

One of Dad's Favorite sayings was, "You are just the man I am looking for" . He would then follow up with an intended slight of " I need a person with a strong back and a weak mind". That's when we would point to a sibling in jest. Over time this "greeting" meant there was an awful job that needed to be done. Incredulously Dad would use this "greeting" with neighbors, relatives, and friends.

This phrase became synonymous with Dad. After I told a really good friend of mine Dad's book is Titled "Lucky" he strongly suggested it should change to "You are just the man I am looking for". You see, no one believes Dad's life is lucky. Unless Luck, as they say, is the intersection of preparation meeting opportunity. My Father worked so hard and tirelessly to be prepared, and God presented him with great opportunities.

Dad was an incredible provider for all of us. Stern when the moment called for it, Supportive when we were trying new things and always compassionate when we failed. He could get us back up and try it again. Dad could see in us abilities we did not see in ourselves. When we were older it would be with a Kiss on the forehead and tap on our chest saying "You can do this"

Mom and Dad really liked to entertain. Dad fancied himself as quite the barbecue King. He was not. Regardless, if it was a resident party or having all the cousins over, the format was the same. Mom, sisters and aunts did all the real work while Dad and uncles setup the barbecue pit. The cooks may have indulged a little too much since the result was always the same. Burnt chicken on the outside and pink on the inside. Surprisingly we all survived.

Special shout out to all the cousins. You are always in our hearts. Along this whole journey are our wives and husbands. Collectively known as the “outlaws”. Dad loved and had high regard for all of you. Great spouses, mothers and Fathers.

In one of the condolences someone put a poem with the line, “Look for me in the people I know or loved”. You will see Dad in all the kids and grandkids and their occupations. They are in professions serving others. They are Audiologists, Volunteers, Teachers, Counselors, Speech Therapists, Lawyers, Architects, Engineers, Law enforcement, Military officers and Social workers or sell health care product. Several of them went into health care as Psychologists, LPN’s, Nurses and Doctors. Doing this while raising this own families. Dad lived the Fraternity motto of, “Give expecting nothing there of”

### **Medicine** (Practitioner / Teacher (Professor) )

My father’s Medical career was both as practitioner as well as a professor. He was in practice with Ray Probst for over 20 years. Later in life I learned about the compassion Dad would show his patients. A high school teacher shared the story of his son being born. The baby was indeed born with complications. When he came out and spoke to the new father he said “Let’s take a walk”. Along the way Dad described the baby’s condition and that he would not be able to walk. Dad shared his similar story about when his own son was born with Down Syndrome. He conveyed the special love required for a child with special needs.

As a professor at SLU university, he did a considerable amount of research. One of his greatest academic accomplishments is becoming Department chairman of OB/GYN. He loved SLUMED and considered the OB/GYN department his family.

A tribute from Dr. Gigi Steiff stated, “Dr. Matt Backer offered me my internship and residency in Obstetrics and Gynecology @ St. Louis University. He believed in a young woman who wanted to make a difference for women in St. Louis, MO.” Dad led, facilitated his profession to transition from 7% to 70% women.

To all my fathers’ colleagues you truly gave him his “raison d’etre”. He loved being a Doctor in a collaborative setting.

### **Military:**

Dad’s military career took him on several different adventures. He loved merging family and medicine with the Navy. He had to work extremely hard for advancement.

Dad’s final promotion to Admiral was due to his research and recommendations tied to the overall readiness of the medical reserve corps.

Dad taught and recruited over 400 men and women to become Navy Doctors. One of those women become the first female Admiral in the Navy reserves.

4 of my siblings and 4 grandchildren went into the military. His son and grandson are veterans of the first Gulf War. Both receiving the Kuwaiti freedom medal. 3 of his Grandkids are current active-duty Navy officers. He has a son in law who did three tours in Iraq and Afghanistan

Grandson Kurt, suggested Grandpa's life is very similar to the movie "Big Fish". Too many stories. They all can't be true. After getting approval for leave, the commanding officer indicated she had trained under Grandpa out in San Diego. This reenforced his thought that grandpa in did was a "Big Fish".

### **Going to heaven:**

When Dad died last Saturday, it was symbolic of his whole life. The day was filled with Faith, Family, Medicine, and Navy. He received compassionate care at St. Joe's in St. Charles.

He stunned the Doctor by living until Saturday. God in fact had a plan. Family was in and out the whole day. Around midday we were joined by one of his neighbors and had a small prayer service. Afterwards we asked Dad if he would like to receive the holy Eucharist. He nodded and said Yes. Dad was able to open his mouth when he heard, "The body of Christ". It was the last piece of food Dad ate. When I retold this story to his parish priest, Fr. Mark replied, "Bread for the journey"

More family came throughout the day. More song and prayers were said. My father died at 6:45. Of course he did. Being a 2 Star Admiral dying at dusk on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 9/11 was the only way to go!!

When I think of Dad going to heaven, I imagine him being greeted by Mom, relatives and Friends. They would be singing joyfully,

"We have been Waiting for you" -- "We have been praying for you"

Jesus in all his glory would then arrive and say, " You are just the man I am looking for". I need a man with a strong soul and great faith"

Matt I need you to pray for all these people who are praying for you today. Lessen their burden and anxiety.

Blest are you Admiral, Doctor, Friend, Uncle, Brother, Husband, Grandpa. Blest are you Dad! Yours is truly the kingdom of God.

Love you Dad