

Random Memories of Frank Vaughters

Frank Vaughters was Colleen's pediatrician from the time she was 3 hours old and only 3 pounds. She remained his patient until November 2009, when we all transferred care to a family physician (she was 22 by then.) Frank was killed just two short months later as he worked to provide aid and medical care to women and children in Haiti. He was there when the earthquake struck Haiti on January 12, 2010. He is sorely missed.

We first met Dr. Vaughters at St. Luke's Hospital, just an hour or so after Colleen was born. We had been trying to find a pediatrician prior to her birth, but she just didn't give us time. She was only 3 pounds - which in 1987, was considered on the edge of real viability. Babies smaller than that sometimes survived, but 3 pounds was the real point where they considered the chances to be good. He was the on-call pediatrician at St. Luke's on the day she was born, and since she was premature and so tiny, they called him in to see her. His first words to us were, "She's perfect. Tiny, but perfect." Of course, we already knew that, but it was really nice to have a professional confirm it. He held her in his hands as we talked, and I was amazed to see him occasionally, stroking her head and even bringing her up to give her a kiss on her head a time or two. I don't know if he was that way with all his patients, but his obvious devotion to our tiny daughter won our hearts that day. It never changed.

She was actually quite healthy despite her size. Because I was breastfeeding her, after my discharge from the hospital, Pat and I would go to the hospital about 5:00 in the morning. He would visit and play with her for a bit and then go on to work. I'd stay there at the hospital in one of the special rooms they had set up for nursing moms and Pat would pick me up about 10:00 or 11:00 at night when he finished his second job. When Colleen was about 15 days old, Dr. Vaughters realized just how much time I was spending there and he convinced the hospital that they were not doing anything for her that I wasn't going to do at home. She was allowed to go home at just a bit over 4 pounds, unheard of at that time. It was almost written in stone that babies didn't go home until they reached 5½ pounds. He made a deal with us. He told us that he would arrange for her to go home now, if we would agree that he would see her in his office every other day. For a month, we were in his office 3-4 times a week. During each visit, she spent almost the entire time in his arms. Even when he was through examining her, he continued to hold her as we talked. He didn't just talk to us about her health. He asked about us as well. He was genuinely interested in how we were holding up. I thought it was wonderful at the time, but didn't realize that this wasn't the way most pediatricians act. It wasn't until later, talking to friends, that I found out that what we had found in Frank was so unusual. My friends told of taking their infant to the pediatrician and seeing the doctor only for a second or two as he told them, "Everything looks good. We'll see you in a month."

Pat and I still laugh about what Frank told us one day. Pat had noticed that at that time, Frank always wore bow ties. And not the nice tie-on ones either. He wore cute little clip-on bow ties. It seemed so different from what we were used to. (Back then, most doctors wouldn't dream of seeing patients without a suit and tie - things were much more formal than they are now.) Pat asked him one day about the bow ties. Frank just grinned and said, "Have you ever had a baby pull on your tie? You'd switch to clip-on bow ties, too." (He later switched to turtlenecks - much more practical in my eyes!)

He also told us that that is why he made it a point to never put the stethoscope in his ears until he had the other end firmly in his grasp. Having the thing yanked out of his ears by a baby hurt more than you'd ever imagine. Colleen managed to show us once another reason for this precaution. She

was not having a good and happy day. She had double-barrel ear infections. He had the stethoscope in his hand and ears, but Pat asked him a question just then, so he got distracted for a second. Colleen managed to get hold of the stethoscope and using it much like a microphone, made her pain and displeasure well known. I thought his eyes were going to fly out of his head! He then just simply said, "Well, I guess we know there's nothing wrong with her lungs."

We ran into Dr. Vaughters one afternoon at the local McDonald's. Colleen was fascinated to see him there. It was the first time she'd ever seen him outside of the office. He sat and played with her for a bit. After he left, she turned to us and said, "Wow! He eats at McDonald's just like a normal person!"

When I think of what makes Frank so special to us, there are many things that come to mind, but a few incidences stand out in my mind.

Colleen was a croup baby. She would get the croup badly, several times a year. Usually, I could deal with it at home. I'd shut myself and Colleen up in the bathroom, turn on the faucet and the shower full blast with hot water and let her breathe the steam. I'd come out looking like a drowned rat, but she'd be breathing easier again. There was one night, however, when nothing was helping. The steam didn't work. The humidifier didn't help. When I noticed her lips and fingernails starting to look a little blue, I knew it was time to call the nurse. I called and the answering service said they would have the nurse call me back. Within a few minutes, Dr. Vaughters was on the line calling me himself. He heard what I had to say and then asked to speak to Colleen. She croaked out a few words to him. I don't know what he said to her, but he made her laugh (which was miracle because she'd been crying or whimpering all day long). He then told me that he thought her condition was bad enough that we should take her to the ER at Children's Mercy. Pat was working three jobs at that time and I told Dr. Vaughters that he didn't get off until about 2:00 am. I would call and see if he could get off early, but I wasn't sure. Dr. Vaughters' response at that time was one that will stay with me forever. He said to me, "Okay. You see what you can do. But just in case, here is my home phone number. If he cannot get home to take you, you call me and I'll come by and get the two of you and we'll go to the ER together." Any other doctor would have told me to call a friend or call an ambulance. I can't think of any doctor I've ever know who would volunteer to come to a patient's home and drive them to the hospital himself. I knew for certain then and there that this was an extraordinary man.

A few years later, when Colleen was about 7 or 8 years old (still tiny), we went to his office for a routine visit. She was carrying with her a "new" book that I had picked up at a garage sale. It was the big, oversized, 1947 Disney edition of Uncle Remus tales. (I've since found out that this is a pretty rare collector's item now). When Frank came into the exam room and he spied that book in her hands, his face lit up. He told her, "I had that book when I was a little kid and it was one of my favorites." He sat down, pulled her up on his lap and proceeded to read the book to her, in dialect, funny voices and sounds and all. He read to her for at least 30 minutes or so. Every so often he'd say, before turning a page, "Now on the next page is a picture of . . ." and he'd describe in full detail what was coming up. He had the whole book in his memory from his own childhood. Because of this memory, she cherished that book for years. She called it her "Uncle Dr. Vaughters" book. We later lost it in a fire. I've never been able to replace it. I've tried several time to purchase a couple of copies (one for him and one for her), but the used book sellers and eBay want much more than I'll ever be able to afford.

Another time Pat took Colleen to the doctor by himself when I had to work late. We were without a car at the time, so he took her on the bus. They were the last patient seen that day. After their visit, Pat and Colleen bundled up and started trudging up the hill to the bus stop. Frank came out

of the “doctors’ entrance” and saw them. He drove up to them and said, “This is silly. Get in the car and I’ll take you home. He drove them home, singing silly songs with Colleen all the way.”

Because of her prematurity, Colleen has many developmental delays and difficulties. Dr. Vaughters had told us about his daughter. He said that she faced many of the same difficulties that Colleen did. He’d ask us what was happening with her now - “Any new skills learned? Any developments to note? Any concerns?” After listening to us, he’d say, “Oh, I remember that! Let me tell you what’s coming next!” And he was inevitably right! I never knew for sure if his insight came from his experience as a pediatrician, from his own experiences with his daughter, or a combination of both, but it was reassuring to know that others had been there before, survived it and look forward to more.

When Colleen turned 18, we asked Dr. Vaughters if we should start looking for another doctor for her. He asked us, “Why? She’s my patient and she can remain my patient as long as she needs me. I’ll be here for her for life, if she needs that.” She did need that for a while longer. She was comfortable with him. She looked forward to him “tickling” her on each visit. She adored him. We stayed with him until she was 22. At that time, Pat and I were looking to change physicians for ourselves and we thought it might be a good idea to look at a family practice physician for the whole family. It was just in November, 2009 that we finally transferred her care and ours to a Family Physician. It about broke my heart when I informed Frank that we were going to move on to another doctor.

Pat and I were very early users of the internet. We were using Prodigy when it was still partially owned by Sears Roebuck. (We started out with the BBS’s and went from there.) Frank came to me several times and asked for help in finding the cheapest prices on equipment that he needed for his work in Haiti. (He would pay me for doing the internet services - usually about \$20 or so. I never quite knew whether he REALLY needed my help in this or if he just saw it as a way to help us out when we really needed it.) I remember one time, he told us about his work in Cite Soleil. He told us how there were so many people crammed into this small area. He asked me to find him battery operated bullhorns so that he and the people working with him could be heard. This was on a Monday. I asked him when he needed them and he said he was leaving for Haiti on Sunday. Could I find an inexpensive source who could get 30 bullhorns to him before then? I actually found a company not far away who could supply them, offered a discount and could ship them overnight at no extra charge. Frank was thrilled! It was heartening to me to be involved in his work, even in this small way.

I know in my head that I have to accept the fact that he is gone, but in my heart, I’m still holding out for miracle.