

# Remembering Holly J. Humphrey, MD, MACP



Holly J. Humphrey, MD, MACP

The poet William Stafford wrote about a thread we follow throughout our life that persists among things that change. People often wonder about what it is you are pursuing, but, despite the vicissitudes of life, the thread doesn't change. You never let go of it.

Holly J. Humphrey, MD, MACP (AΩA, University of Chicago Pritzker School of Medicine, 1983), Immediate Past President of AΩA, died of pancreatic cancer April 17. Her “thread” was clear to all who knew her: To hold herself up to the highest ideals of the profession of medicine. She was a person of earnest conviction, and her spirit impacted all who had the good fortune to interact with her.

A graduate of North Central College in Naperville Illinois, Dr. Humphrey later became the first woman to serve as their Board Chair. Following college, she spent nearly 40 years at the University of Chicago, earning her MD with honors, followed by a residency and chief residency in internal medicine and a fellowship in pulmonary and critical care medicine. Dr. Humphrey then joined the faculty and was the internal medicine residency program director for 14 years followed by 15 years as the

Ralph W. Gerard Professor of Medicine and Dean for Medical Education.

During her tenure, she made many important and lasting contributions to the education of health professionals, including being the first institution in the country to conduct the White Coat Ceremony for medical students. Significantly, graduating medical students at the University of Chicago selected her for the institution's Gender Equity Award on five occasions, and honored her with the Favorite Faculty Teaching Award 27 times.

In 2018, she was named the eighth President of the Josiah Macy Jr. Foundation where she established a forward-thinking agenda based on her resolute commitment to justice, compassion, and medical education. She established new grantmaking initiatives and collaborative relationships and was a much sought-after speaker in many important venues of health professions education. Dr. Humphrey's work at the Macy Foundation was described as “guided by moral principles that were apparent to all who worked with her. She led by example with grace and joy.”

Despite her incredibly busy schedule, she was elected President of Alpha Omega Alpha in 2024. As the President of AΩA just before Holly, I had the opportunity to work closely with her. When I asked her how she found the time and energy to take on this additional position, she told me it was because she believed deeply in AΩA's effort to support and exemplify the meaning and value of medical professionalism. I quickly appreciated that she embodied two rare traits among successful leaders: The ability to attend to details while not losing sight of the big picture, and an uncanny capacity to see projects through from conception to implementation. She never wavered in her goal of making AΩA the best it could be.

Among the many comments submitted by AΩA members upon learning of her death were: “extraordinary physician leader, mentor, and cherished colleague;” “her intellect, professionalism and kindness were immediately apparent;” and “I don't know what part of her was more gigantic: her brain or her

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heart.” On a personal level, she was a wonderful colleague to work with on practically any issue, and she did so with humility and the ability to listen to what was being said before reacting.

Over the course of her highly productive career, Dr. Humphrey received many awards and held many additional positions of responsibility, including: Master of the American College of Physicians; Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians (London); election to The National Academy of Medicine; chairing the boards of the American Board of Internal Medicine and the Kaiser Permanente Bernard J. Tyson School of Medicine; and the recipient of the Dema C. Daley Foundation Award for national excellence as an educator, innovator, and leader by the Association of Program Directors in Internal Medicine.

Dr. Humphrey is survived by her husband, Duane Follman, MD (AQA, University of Chicago Pritzker School of Medicine, 1986, Resident); her three children: Sarah Follman, MD, Benjamin Follman, MD (AQA, Loyola University Chicago Stritch School of Medicine, 2023, Resident), and Hannah Follman; and her two brothers: Philip and Richard.

On May 8, I had the opportunity to speak with her daughter, Dr. Sarah Follman, who graciously discussed with me her thoughts about her mother and

shared the eulogy she presented. She told me how her mother’s true greatness went beyond her résumé. She was fiercely loyal and supportive of her family. She embraced life with deep passion and joy, loved art museums, the symphony orchestra and opera, interior design, reading, great restaurants, and long walks. She cherished her relationships, was of deep faith and unwavering conviction, and believed that every person deserves dignity, respect, and love. She was guided by a strong moral compass where she wove integrity and compassion into everything she did. Her Mom taught her how to love deeply, live purposefully, and hold fast to what is right.

I last spoke with Holly via Zoom on March 19. While her disease was clearly taking its toll, her spirit was untouched. She updated me on events at AQA and the Macy Foundation, then discussed her ideas about the future of medicine along with suggestions for the many issues facing the profession she loved. Holly J. Humphrey, MD, MACP, never let go of the thread.

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