

From the trenches to retirement for SLT doc

By Linda Fine Conaboy

You might not expect a vascular surgeon to be dressed in a plaid, flannel shirt, with shirt sleeves rolled to the elbow and a bill cap hugging his head at a jaunty angle. But Irwin Berman isn't your regular surgeon.

And you probably wouldn't expect the good doctor to call MontBleu casino home either. But Berman, like we said, isn't just a regular guy and MontBleu is a temporary residence, at least he's hoping so.

At 87, Berman is now retired. And in late December he was firmly ensconced in his South Lake Tahoe home in Trout Creek Meadows, waiting for his kids to arrive from Southern California to spend Christmas with him.

Unfortunately, just before the holiday (and his children) arrived, the sewer system arrived too, backing up into Berman's home and eventually forcing him out of the house and into the Stateline hotel-casino.



Irwin Berman of South Lake Tahoe has watched the field of medicine evolve.
Photo/Provided

For one armed with a seemingly unassuming and soft-spoken disposition, Berman's life so far has been one of bumping into and making the most of golden opportunity.

He and his twin brother, Stanley, a thoracic surgeon, were born in 1929 to immigrant parents in the small west Texas town of Colorado City—that's Colorado with a long A, about 70 miles from Abilene.

His father, from Lithuania, and his mother, from London, met and married in the early 1900s.

"The reason I'm from Texas," he related somewhat incredulously and still with a discernible Texas drawl, "is that my dad's ship from Lithuania landed in Texas. I found the ship's log where the captain had written that dad's family was on board, all the way from Lithuania, with less than one dollar to their names." His mom, he said, landed at Ellis Island.

Although his parents didn't have a particularly long life, the Berman boys have; there is an older brother, Harold, who at age 90 is still a practicing attorney in Dallas.

According to Berman, while at the University of Texas where both twins studied medicine, they were drafted into the Korean War; however, with the dean running interference, the duo was deferred from active military service until after graduation.

Irwin entered the Navy as a lieutenant (junior grade) and was stationed at the Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Md.; at the same time, Stanley, also a lieutenant, joined the Army and was stationed at Walther Reed Army Medical Center. Because of the close proximity of the two health centers, they saw each other

often.

After their tours in Maryland, Irwin became a flight surgeon and moved on to the Alameda Naval Air Station, while Stanley was assigned to a MASH-like unit, which was not nearly as hilarious as the unit portrayed on the TV show. "Not at all," Berman laughed.

During his two-year stint in Alameda, Berman said if the injuries troops sustained during the Korean conflict were serious, they were flown to the States, but if not, transportation by ship was the order of the day (the General Mann, a troop transport that served in WWII, the Korean War and the Vietnam War). It was on this ship that Berman spent his time tending to the injured on the return trip from Korea.

While on active duty, both brothers, unbeknownst to each other, applied and were accepted to the residency program at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., a grueling program that included 36 hours on duty and 12 hours off.

"We got \$150 a month, but the GI Bill supported us for four years at Mayo. My brother and I went to Houston to work with Dr. Michael DeBakey and Dr. (Denton) Cooley, both pioneers in heart and vascular surgery," he said.

Cooley is well-known for the first heart transplant and DeBakey for inventing the roller pump, a central component of the heart-lung machine.

Although he was a genius and becoming well-known for his amazing skills, DeBakey was not a man who inspired a companionable feeling within his students. "He was terrible to work with," Berman said. "He was an excellent surgeon, but just not a people person. He stood behind us and would literally kick us, while calling us names."

Additionally, Berman and his brother trained in surgery with Charles Mayo, the son of the founder of the Mayo Clinic.

With families to think about now, the Berman brothers concluded it was time to settle somewhere they loved and open their joint practice. In tandem, they selected California as their landing place—Santa Cruz.

In the seaside town the twins happily practiced surgery for 10 years; Irwin working in his specialty and Stanley in his. But when the Cuban missile crisis became a looming and frightening threat in 1961-62, Irwin, who was still in the naval reserves, decided it was time to make his exit from military life.

Sending a resignation letter to his superiors prompted a return missive from President Lyndon Johnson congratulating him on his promotion to commander in the Navy. It seemed that Irwin was not to become a civilian after all.

While he was still in the naval reserves, and still practicing in Santa Cruz, surprisingly, the Army came calling, seeking him out and asking if he would become an Army surgeon stationed in Europe for three years.

“I thought this was the biggest joke,” he said. However, the Army was serious in its bid to pre-empt this Navy family, and the Bermans, now including two children, packed up and moved to Nuremberg, Germany, where he remained as chief of surgery in a military hospital for three years.

“My wife and kids liked it in Germany,” he said. “Dad was home more.”

From Germany he went to Fort Huachuca in Arizona, where Berman decided to move from the Army reserve to the regular Army, leading to his promotion to a full colonel.

Taking it all in stride and continuing to practice medicine, the colonel and his wife took another post in Seoul, Korea, where he was named chief of surgery in 1989. By this time, the peripatetic doctor was beyond the Army’s mandatory retirement age of 60. Not a problem, he said, the Army simply extended

him beyond retirement age.

Three years later, at age 63, Berman finally returned stateside, retiring from the Army at Fort Hood, Texas.

Fast forward to his life as a full-time resident of South Lake Tahoe, which began while the family still resided in Santa Cruz with the building of a summer home at Tahoe. During those busy years, with his wife and kids ensconced in their Tahoe home, Berman established his regular summer-time commute between the lake home and his seaside residence.

Unfortunately, divorce upended Berman's retirement plans to spend the winter in Arizona and warmer months at Tahoe where he planned to assist other practicing Lake Tahoe surgeons.

"Come to find out, at South Lake Tahoe, where I had become a full-time resident, I had to carry full malpractice insurance, which in 1994-95 was \$100,000 and which [the local hospital] refused to cover. So I went to a Harveys casino job fair, where I was hired and for eight months to work the 2-10am shift when the high rollers were there."

It may seem surprising that a renowned surgeon, a retired Naval commander and a retired Army colonel would wind up at Harveys, but listening to him talk, Berman has no regrets about his job as a keeper of statistics at a local casino.

Although he said now he's doing exactly what he wants to do, he intimated that he would have liked to keep the casino job, but not on a full-time basis, which would have been a requirement.

Nevertheless, now, after a couple of surgeries that require him to walk with a cane, Berman is a happy man with time to feed his growing interest in geology, fostered by his life in the desert at Fort Huachuca.

"I've taken all the courses in geology that Lake Tahoe

Community College offers," he said, with perhaps a longing for warmer climes. "The least thing I like about Lake Tahoe is the winter and the cold and snow. But the best things are the beautiful scenery, the clean air and the small town atmosphere. I'll leave this place when I die."

And what does he think about the state of medicine today?

"In Santa Cruz there was no Medicare. I thought when the government got into medicine, it would ruin it. I think this has proved true. I don't blame the young doctors for putting in their hours and not being on call like I was," Berman said. "Now there are so many government regulations"

However, he quickly added, "Technically, healthcare has advanced far more than I anticipated, but I think that perhaps doctors don't care about medicine as much as we did."