Endowment in memory
of Kenneth M. Viste, Jr., MD

A lesson for us all

Three Miles by Wheelchair

By Steve Busalacchi

“I remember it as if it was yesterday—September 17, 1955,” recalled Kenneth Viste, Jr., MD. “When I tried to get out of bed, I fell flat on my face. I never walked again.”

Polio had struck the 13-year-old farm boy from northern Wisconsin. From then on, he would be in and out of hospitals constantly undergoing therapies. After more than a year of this, Ken was bored and desperately needed a break from the monotony, so he hatched a plan to play hooky from his Madison hospital one afternoon to go visit the Governor. Yes the Governor and no, Ken didn’t know him. But the way he saw it, the Governor and he were in the same city, so why not drop by?

The self-described “gangly” teenager got in his wheelchair, rolled out of the hospital and into traffic. He went up hills, over curbs and finally, three miles later, arrived at Governor Kohler’s office at the State Capitol.

“Do you have an appointment?” the secretary asked.

Before answering, Ken sat up straight then locked the brakes on his wheelchair, indicating he wasn’t going anywhere.

“Well, not really,” he replied. “But I am sure he would want to see me if he knew I was here. My name is Ken Viste.”

A few minutes later, Governor Kohler came out and shook his hand. Then he invited Ken into his office where they chatted for the next 45 minutes.

Kenneth M. Viste, Jr., MD (1941-2005)

To honor and remember Dr. Viste’s extraordinary life, the Wisconsin Medical Society Foundation has established the Kenneth Viste, Jr., MD, Young Physician Leadership Award for those who exemplify the unique legacy of Dr. Viste: commitment to patients, profession and community.

Wisconsin Medical Society Foundation
What Ken had back then, in addition to a disabling illness, was pure chutzpa. That level of determination helped Ken drive over the obstacle he encountered in his life.

After graduating from Sturgeon Bay High School in 1959, Dr. Viste won a full scholarship to the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana. After graduation in 1962, he attended Northwestern Medical School. After eight years in Chicago, Dr. Viste entered private practice as a neurologist in the Fox Valley and remained in Oshkosh for the rest of his life. He founded Lakeside Neurocare and served as medical director of the Physical Rehabilitation Unit at Mercy Medical Center from 1974 until he passed away on August 21, 2005 from complications arising from gallbladder cancer.

Dr. Viste was fascinated with public policy and became an active leader in the medical community serving as president of the Wisconsin Medical Society in 1987-1988. He also served as president of the Wisconsin Medical Society Foundation and chair of the Wisconsin Physicians Political Action Committee Board. In addition to his efforts at the state level, Dr. Viste was president of the American Academy of Neurology from 1995-1997, served as a delegate to the American Medical Association and was president of the American Society of Neurorehabilitation among other positions.

Dr. Viste was greatly respected and admired by his colleagues and staff as a champion for the medical profession and the rights of patients. He was honored to be a physician and cared deeply about the patients he served.

To honor Dr. Viste’s extraordinary life, the Wisconsin Medical Society Foundation established the Kenneth Viste, Jr., MD, Young Physician Leadership Award for those who exemplify the legacy of Dr. Viste: commitment to patients, profession and community. Thanks to donations from Dr. Viste’s colleagues, family and friends, the young physician chosen each year is presented with an engraved award and the Foundation makes a contribution to a charitable organization selected by the award recipient.