

Medical Wisdom is Knighted



LADY ATHERTON AND SIR FRANK ATHERTON on the Staten Island Ferry. Photo: Eric Uhlfelder.

By Eric Uhlfelder

Winston Churchill, Sidney Poitier, Paul McCartney. This prestigious list of remarkable people who have been knighted by the British monarchy now includes a friend—a commoner who's anything but.

I met Frank Atherton many decades ago at the University of Pennsylvania when I was writing my first book and he was taking a semester off from his medical studies at Leeds University in England to see how medicine was taught at Penn.

We reconnected several years ago when he heard about the Five Boro Bike Tour. As a regular in the event, Atherton's subsequent stays at the Incentra Village Hotel in the West Village have made him a bit of an honorary neighbor.

Little did I know his career in public healthcare had crafted a remarkable compendium of critical public policy experiences that was recently recognized by knighthood. The actual pomp won't occur until later this year when he visits Buckingham Palace. But it was made official in a New Year's Eve missive he received at home in Cardiff, where he has been the chief medical officer of Wales since 2016.

"It's all quite unexpected and I'm still rather shocked by it all," Atherton recently told me, especially, when he was queuing for a half-marathon run, to find the young women at the registration table curtsying at his presence.

After earning his medical degree and training as a GP in England, Atherton joined the British equivalent of the US Peace Corps. In the late 1980s he found himself in the Central African nation of Malawi, where early on he learned the critical link between domestic politics and effective health care. His firsthand experi-

ence of maternal mortality in rural villages also revealed how girls' education, nutrition, and a community's overall welfare are inextricably linked.

From then on, Atherton realized what he wanted to do. He earned a Master's degree in Public Health and then signed on with the World Health Organization as a public health officer.

This led him smack into the middle of the Yugoslavian civil war of the mid-1990s. He worked in the Croatian town of Zagreb to assess and enhance a struggling healthcare system straining under the weight of fighting, poverty, and a growing number of refugees. He often visited Bihac, an enclave in Serbian-occupied Bosnia, where he was once shot at while crossing a checkpoint at dusk.

"We were there to help target medical and emergency supplies during a desperate time," Atherton remembers. "Here in the West we take for granted how essential peace and stability are for healthcare systems to work."

His next posting was in Tanzania, where he was a project director of a UK-funded family health project. Its goal was to enhance the physical and medical infrastructure and to train aid workers and professionals, while engaging with the local populations—especially their political leaders.

Atherton then found himself in the middle of a \$2.3 billion multinational aid effort—the first of its kind—targeting the impoverished country of Bangladesh. Pursuing similar goals to those in Tanzania, this project was made more challenging by a contentious national leadership fight; an incoming government initially refused to sustain anything that would reflect well on the former leader. "As we see today,"

observes Atherton, "political division can impede the crafting of a unified and effective healthcare response, especially during a crisis."

Dr. Atherton returned to England, for what would be his longest stint in any one place, when he was appointed director of public health of North Lancashire between 2002 and 2012. Any illusion that this would be a more passive gig gave way on his second day on the job when the country's worst case of Legionnaire's disease broke out.

He then returned to North America as deputy chief medical officer of Nova Scotia. The most notable event during his time in Canada was the scare brought by the outbreak of MERS-CoV in the Middle East. The province prepared for the disease's arrival. Ironically, Atherton was to learn, it was the extreme lethal nature of this coronavirus that actually kept it from spreading. In contrast with Covid-19, patients simply didn't live long enough for that to happen.

Four years later, in 2016, he washed back onto the shores of the United Kingdom, accepting the position of chief medical officer of Wales. In early 2020, less than a month after recognizing the severity of Covid-19, he was part of leadership that decided the UK needed to go into lockdown.

As Wales' lead medical advisor—the country's Dr. Fauci—Atherton was working 12-hour days, six to seven days a week during the height of the pandemic, constantly conferencing with health officials and political leaders, and fielding questions at press events several times a week. One of his greatest challenges, echoing his earlier work, was finding "our medical and political bureaucracy wasn't prepared to deal with the stress of such a crisis, especially during lockdown."

Atherton is cautiously optimistic that we may have seen the worst of Covid, especially with the advent and widespread distribution of safe and effective vaccines and rapid medical responses to the changing character of the disease. But he fears the virus will continue to mutate because virtually all of the third world—including places he knows so well—are insufficiently vaccinated.

While being CMO turned out to be far more challenging than he was banking on, returning home did bring a wonderful surprise. An avid runner all his life, he met "the lovely Ann," a fellow doctor—a neurologist—through a running club, and they wed during the pandemic.

Being locked down did have its perks. But friends around the world are still waiting for the wedding party to come off. Maybe this summer. But before then, in May, he'll be back in the Village with Ann to again bike the five boroughs and to raise a pint at Tavern on Jane.

Running From the Holocaust

By Joel Lobenthal

My father wanted to perform due diligence on Nazism. Seventy years ago, he was studying law at the University of Chicago when he took a year abroad in an exchange program with the University of Frankfurt.

He died exactly one year ago, and I'm now reading a particularly relevant essay that he wrote twenty years ago. *Not So Long Ago or So Far Away*, describes his stay in Germany and the supposition that he wanted to test. "I believed that ordinary Germans knew or suspected what was on the horizon and should have been able to do something to foil the ensuing obscenities. I blamed them for not having done so." Yet he was writing this as the Bush-Cheney regime was shredding civil liberties here in America. He watched a feckless American resistance that could not stop Bush's march to a war of choice in Iraq launched on lies. Dad—Joseph Spiro Lobenthal, Jr.—realized he could no longer pass judgment as easily as he had in his twenties.

In *Not So Long Ago or So Far Away*, Dad recalls that Frankfurt in 1953 was fast being rebuilt, but entire blocks remained in bombed-out ruins. On some lots, fenced-in community vegetable gardens grew. Prostitutes stood every few yards on one main thoroughfare leading to the train station. Many were war widows; their customers were mostly Americans who occupied the city. They were headquartered in the former office complex of the IG Farben company. It had been tried at Nuremberg for manufacturing chemicals for genocide.

Germans had been forced to submit to a Truth and Reconciliation process. It attempted to ensure that the population understood exactly what had happened, took some responsibility for it, and was primed to ensure that it never happened again. Obviously it worked, or at least it has so far. But paradoxically, and anecdotally what Dad found was a resolute silence on the part of students and faculty to discuss or even acknowledge the recent past.

Occasionally, he was even subject to recriminations: "We had Goebbels and burned books. You have McCarthy and Roy Cohn." He found this doubly troubling because Frankfurt's University, named for Goethe, had a long tradition of humanism—that same lineage in Germany's culture that bred denial in the minds of so many Jews who elected to remain. Post-war, the University was "now distinctly politically Left," he writes.

What appeared to motivate the Germans Dad talked to was above all a determination

continued on page 7