In Memoriam Dr. Ernesto Contreras, Sr. (1915-2003)

by Howard Straus

On October 14th, at 10:15pm, Dr. Ernesto Contreras, Sr. died of natural causes in Playas de Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico. We printed a notice of his passing in the last Newsletter, but due to deadline pressure, were unable to properly acknowledge his great accomplishments, humanity, friendship and help.

Ernesto Contreras was born in Guadalajara, Jalisco to a family that had lost everything to the Mexican revolution. Their woes were compounded when his father died, leaving a widow and five children eking out a living on a Mexico City teacher’s salary during the depression.

Despite these seemingly insurmountable obstacles, Dr. Contreras graduated with honors from the Military Medical School in the capital, and soon afterwards wed his life partner, Rita Pulido. He specialized in pediatric pathology at Boston Children’s Hospital under Dr. Sidney Farber, and later accepted a commission from the Army to become the first pathologist in Baja California.

Despite a generous offer from Mercy Hospital in San Diego and legal help to immigrate to the United States, Dr. Contreras remained in his beloved Mexico, in a small consultation office in Tijuana.

In 1962, Dr. Contreras’ life took a dramatic turn, one that would lead him onto the world stage as a medical pioneer to some, and a heretic to others. Cecile Hoffman from San Diego had received laetrile for her cancer in Canada, and wished to continue the helpful substance under the care of a physician closer to home. Dr. Contreras agreed to treat her, and was astounded when her cancer quickly cleared up. From this first case, Dr. Contreras received so many referrals that he soon had to open the facility now known as Oasis of Hope Hospital in Playas de Tijuana.

Over the ensuing four decades, over 100,000 patients have received treatment at Oasis of Hope, over half of them for cancer. They were able to get the compassionate, caring and often effective treatment denied them in the United States, only yards away. Dr. Contreras exemplified the medical philosophy that he constantly drummed into his medical staff: love your patients as yourself, and above all, do no harm.

Dr. Contreras never set out to be an “alternative” physician; he perennially insisted that he was only seeking to provide the best therapy he could for his patients. His championing of laetrile led him to direct and controversial opposition with the American medical community, which seems to consistently oppose any safe or effective medication.

In addition to his medical practice, Dr. Contreras manifested his deep religious convictions by ministering to his patients’ spiritual as well as medical needs. A profoundly compassionate man, he led services at Oasis’ chapel on Sunday, never for a moment considering it a burden to come to his hospital seven days a week for decades. He was popular for his singing, songwriting and poetry as well as his attentive bedside manner, an art that has largely disappeared in today’s technologically oriented medical practice.

Over his long and productive lifetime, Dr. Contreras was awarded many honors, and his list of accomplishments is almost too long to begin to list. It is, however, a telling tribute to the man’s love and reverence for his family that among his most cherished accomplishments he counted his 62-year marriage to Rita Pulido de Contreras as one of his most important.

Always a fan and supporter of the various Gerson Therapy Centers in Playas de Tijuana, Dr. Contreras generously provided a home for the Gerson Therapy in a wing of his facility during a “homeless” period in the peregrinations of the Gerson treatment center. For two years, the Gerson Therapy was practiced at Oasis of Hope, before the current Baja Nutri Care complex was completed.

Dr. Contreras leaves behind him a lasting legacy of love, medical pioneering, a thriving and modern medical facility, over a hundred thousand grateful patients, and a family that numbers six children, twenty grandchildren and thirty great-grandchildren. His name will forever be associated with the provision of caring and effective medical treatment in Baja California.

We will miss this great man, and we consider it an honor to remain close friends with his loving and supportive family. Vaya con Dios, Ernesto!