



When Ellen Wynn graduated from D. T. Watson in 1947, little did she know that the journey that lay ahead would span 50 years and 13 time zones. Now officially retired in St. Petersburg, Fla., Ellen Wynn Lesh has established a legacy of physical, emotional, and monetary support for children with disabilities, and more recently, single mothers and a youth soccer team in the Philippines.

Her memories of D.T. Watson are mixed. "It was a great place for us to be at the time, living on campus and working directly with children with polio," Lesh recalls. "However, it was difficult to watch them live with the disease. We learned so much from their strength." She also had the opportunity to study under Dr. Jessie Wright, the first of many of the early pioneers of physical therapy with whom she would work and study during her career.

She hadn't set out to study physical therapy. Lesh's early time at Pitt was dedicated to getting a Bachelor of Science degree. But when her uncle passed away suddenly – he had supported the family after they were abandoned by her father – Lesh had to find another way to fund her education. It so happened that scholarships in physical therapy were being offered to train professionals to treat the alarming number of new polio patients, and Lesh jumped at the chance.

Following graduation, she began working on Pittsburgh's Southside at a place she fondly remembers as "Miss Perry's Class for Handicapped Children." Summers were spent working in Wilkes-Barre, Pa., at one of the first camps for children with disabilities. Lesh would later go on to establish more camps in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and West Virginia, many of which still exist today.

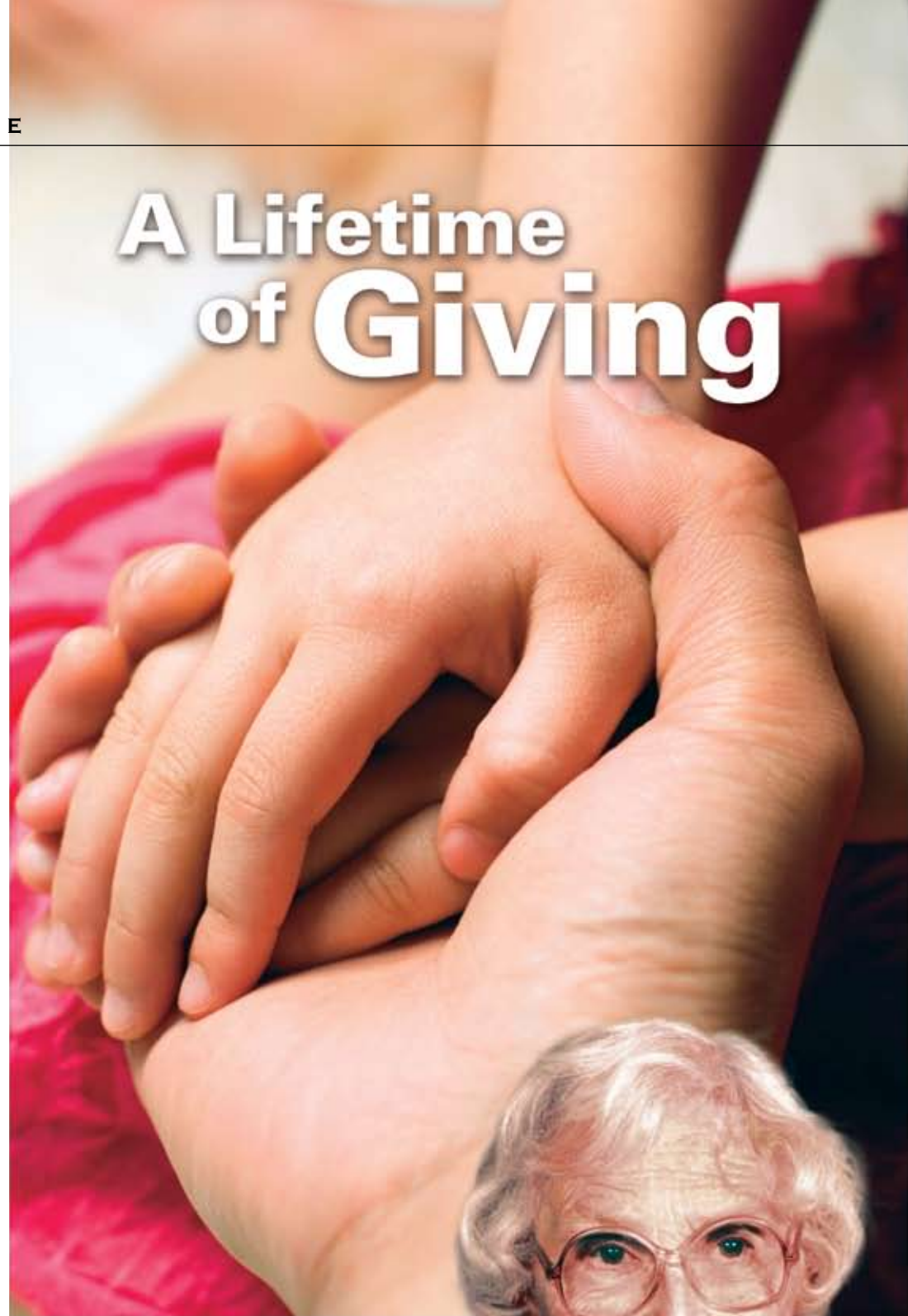
After leaving Miss Perry's, she spent the next five years in York, Pa., working for the Easter Seal Society. "We were working to establish a permanent residence for people with disabilities so that when they grew older, they would be able to maintain their independence," she says, noting that most of the children she worked with had cerebral palsy.

She then met and married William W. Lesh, Sr., M.D., and took a hiatus from physical therapy to raise six children. Until they were all in school, Lesh worked in the lab,

a skill she had learned while at Pitt. When the time was right, she took a position with the West Virginia Health Department and Human Resources. "We would hop in a Jeep and travel the countryside looking for children with polio and other disabilities, and take them back to the clinic," which was overseen by Edmond McDonald, M.D., who was also the sports medicine physician for the then Baltimore Colts and a founding member of the NFL Physicians Society.

She started a camp in Hardy County, W.Va., dubbed Camp Pinnacle, and enlisted all of her children as counselors, recalls her daughter, Susan. "The campers were blind and deaf.

A Lifetime of Giving



It certainly taught us how lucky we were to be happy and healthy kids. But we had great fun and we learned a lot," says Susan, who became the first female chief master sergeant in the history of the 167th Airlift Wing in 2003. She was named the West Virginia Air Guard's Outstanding Airman for 2005.

Teaching the Teachers

Ellen Lesh then decided to tackle work for the state of Maryland, instructing teachers at Coppin State Teachers College how to work with students with special needs. It was during this time that she had the opportunity to work with Margaret Rood, internationally recognized for her development of a neurophysiologic approach in the treatment of central nervous system disorders, such as cerebral palsy.

Once the teachers had been taught, Lesh spent 14 years with Frederick County School System. She also assisted the Potomac Center, a division of Maryland's Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, in establishing homes for children with disabilities.

At Last Retirement – Well Almost

Before retiring to St. Petersburg with her husband, Lesh ventured back to York to visit the residence that she helped establish. "I was so surprised. Greeting me at the door was Emily, now in her fifties. She showed me the Christmas cards she was making, a hobby she began as a child." Emily then guided Lesh to Dennis' room. Dennis, it seems, had a crush on Lesh when he was a child – and apparently still did. "It was wonderful to see them again; wonderful to see that they were living healthy, independent lives, despite their cerebral palsy."

"Retirement" for husband William meant working in the St. Petersburg Free Clinic where, as luck would have it, a grant was received that required a physical therapist. "We would assess babies at the hospital and then go to their homes to provide PT." Lesh started the work as a team of one and for six years, helped the children. Today, there are teams of therapists working in three counties.

In 1994, William and Ellen established the Lesh Family Foundation, whose

mission is "supporting charitable organizations that further the belief in Christianity and a free and fair democratic society." The Foundation meant more predictable support for the clinics they already had helped to sustain in St. Petersburg and Pinellas County.

But then tragedy struck. Ellen Lesh developed an aneurysm and had a stroke and a heart attack. It took her two years to recover, during which time a lot happened. Sadly, her husband died in 1997. "That was obviously a very sad time for us," recalls Susan Lesh. "My mother was completely unaware that our father had passed away. It was difficult news to break to her when she regained consciousness."



On a more positive note, Lesh was honored, in absentia, by then Florida Governor Jeb Bush for all her work on behalf of the women and children of Pinellas County. Along with their work with the Free Clinic, the Leshes also supported the Pregnancy Care Center of Pinellas County, where they assisted single mothers and babies born addicted to drugs.

The Lesh Foundation Goes International

November 6, 2005 was a great day for the people of Dumaguete City, Negros Oriental, the Philippines. Some 1,000 people received medical and dental attention at a new mission. The facility was the brainchild of one of Ellen Lesh's sons, William Jr., and his wife, Vivian Mendez-Lesh, a Filipina. Bill, a US attaché currently assigned to Bagdad, recognized that the Lesh Family Foundation could help to provide medical care for the people of the region.

Vivian marshaled the support of the Rotary Club Dumaguete-South, which provided medical equipment and services. Silliman University Medical Center, Holy

Child Hospital, and Negros Oriental Provincial Hospital were called on to staff the facility, and the Lesh Foundation provided the bricks and mortar. Vivian herself donated land for the Medical-Dental Mission.

"It was truly a wonderful day," she says. "Seeing all the patients – primarily women and children – finally have an opportunity to receive check ups and immunizations was truly gratifying."

The Lesh clan has visited the mission since the opening day, attending Easter services in 2006. They're also helping to field a youth soccer team, complete with matching jerseys. "We didn't realize it, but we purchased the shirts for children who had no shoes," Lesh laments. So once again, the foundation was called on to help children in need.

Great Remembrances

For all the good the foundation has done, it's the individual achievements Ellen Lesh recalls when asked about the highlights of her extensive career. "I remember a boy named Robert. He and his twin were born with disabilities – hydroencephalitis – and placed in an institution, where the brother eventually died.

"Robert was quite a handful, eating everything in sight, regardless of whether or not it was food," Lesh recalls. "So they tied him in a wheelchair at an early age, and that's where he stayed until I saw him at age 43." Consequently, Robert never learned to walk, and the back of his head was flat because of his confinement. Lesh and a colleague managed to get him out of his chair and, with a lot of time and effort, taught him to walk.

"His face just beamed," Lesh marveled. She also remembers Iris, another former patient, who, in her forties, made her first trip to an amusement park with Ellen, who took her on the carousel and the rollercoaster.

Lesh credits her education and training at the University with allowing her to excel personally and professionally at every stage of her life. Daughter Susan concluded: "It was as though God planned that she receive this preparation to provide service to others throughout her life. She has served as a role model for my brothers and sister to continue service to others." ☘