Of all the accolades he has received, the one he treasures most is "Dr. G. Rainey Williams: Surgeon."
Revered, respected, loved by colleagues and students alike, this OUHSC surgeon set the standard for all who follow.

The Legacy of Rainey Williams

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In the blink of an eye Rainey Williams could see himself as he arrived at this place 38 years before. Scanning the audience of 300 or so, he saw a few old friends and colleagues who also remembered what 1958 had been like.

Williams had been a 34-year-old assistant professor of surgery, happy to have landed his first academic job with such talented, energetic and dedicated clinical faculty. His wife, Martha, an Oklahoma City native, was thrilled that he had accepted the appointment at the University of Oklahoma's medical school when he could have stayed at Johns Hopkins or joined the Stanford faculty.

Martha was next to him now, smiling at the well-wishers queuing up to congratulate the couple on the extraordinary honors bestowed on Rainey that day, October 15, 1996.

Rainey remembered what a highly unsettled situation he had stepped into in the summer of 1958. Surgeons in private practice always had run the OU surgery department in their spare time. But in 1955, John C. Schilling had become chairman with a mandate to transform the department into a strong academic unit staffed with full-time faculty dedicated to teaching, research and service. Rainey Williams bolstered a formidable department, but Schilling had turned professional relationships upside down. Not wanting to relinquish their former fiefdom, the private practice surgeons attempted to have Schilling fired for unspecified actions detrimental to the medical school.

Medical school Dean Mark Everett had shrewdly formed an unbiased and respected committee, which, of course, found no grounds for dismissal; Schilling survived the coup. Williams had been greatly relieved. If an excellent chair-

man like Schilling could be fired on someone's whim, then the medical school was no place for him, either. The crisis averted, Williams passed his certification exams in both general and thoracic surgery in 1959.

Now, 37 years later, it was a prime October afternoon, one that the meteorologically minded pronounced fitting for the occasion. The audience was assembled on the lawn in front of University Hospital's Everett Tower (named for the late dean). Across the street was the building that housed most of the College of Medicine's clinical departments. Until June, Williams had administered the Department of Surgery from his office on the third floor. The building had stood there for years, yet the gathering people kept glancing at it.

The ceremony to honor their esteemed friend and colleague had transformed the building in a way that was both trivial and profound. On a superficial level, only its name had been changed. It was no longer the pedantic-sounding South Pavilion. The importance of the change was in the building's new name, the G. Rainey Williams Pavilion, and what such an action signified.

Of all the building dedications held on the Oklahoma City campus, this was the most personal and unique. At the ceremony, Williams secretly may have savored this thought; in one capacity or another, he probably had attended all of the building dedications since the '60s. He had been chairman of the surgery department for 22 years, served as chief of staff at University Hospital during two crisis periods and provided essential stability as interim dean of the College of Medicine three separate times. continued
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Williams could have been permanent dean any of those times—even Health Sciences Center provost, had he been so inclined. But he never had permitted his personal and professional popularity to divert him from his highest level of competence. He always maintained his equilibrium, and his judgment remained impeccable. He had not allowed his ego to be inflated by the praise and numerous awards that came his way.

What made this dedication ceremony unique was that the powers-that-be, the members of the University Hospitals Authority, had the good sense to honor Williams during his lifetime. They wanted to show him how much he was loved and respected. They wanted to honor his exceptional service to the University, the teaching hospitals, the state and a legion of medical students and surgeons-in-training.

In the audience that October 15, he could see colleagues who represented one or more of those groups. In addition to his wife, three of their four children were present as well as some of their grandchildren. His oldest and closest friends, Bob Ellis and Dick Clements, were there. They had met in 1942 when Williams’ mother, Hildred, had moved Rainey and his identical twin brother, Russell, from their home in Atlanta to Oklahoma City.

The boys’ father was in the Army. Rainey had been named for him: G. (for George) Rainey Williams. The family had been happy; at least that is how Rainey remembered it. They were all musical and would at times form an unusual quartet: Hildred sang, Rainey the father played flute, Rainey the son played French horn and Russell, the violin.

They were uprooted by the war, then permanently separated when Mr. Williams announced from North Carolina that he would not be returning.

Rainey and Russell enrolled at Classen High School and joined a fraternity, then very much in vogue. Rainey met Martha Vose—pretty, petite, charming, smart and the daughter of the president of the First National Bank, one of the city’s two largest banks. “We hit it off immediately,” Rainey recalls, “and it wasn’t long before I knew that someday we would be married.”

After high school graduation in 1944, he was admitted to the Navy’s V-12 program, a vehicle for producing officers with specialized training. He was assigned to the University of Texas, where as a pre-med student he drilled, partied and studied for two years. He particularly liked zoology and philosophy. “I was amazed to find that there was a discipline on thinking. I had never thought very much about thinking.”

In 1946, Williams enrolled at the Northwestern University medical school in Chicago. He had chosen medicine but did not quite know why. But within a few weeks he knew he was in the right place at the right time with people like him who were giving their best. Out of the initial anxiety and insecurity, order had emerged; he found that he could not only compete but also excel. And it was not just that he could do this, but that he wanted to do this. He felt his life had direction and purpose.

Williams was leaning toward surgery even before his clinical rotation. “Actually, the first time I saw surgery being performed in one of those surgical amphitheaters, I almost passed out. I don’t recall the details, but it was some sort of operation in which they were spilling a great deal of blood.”

Later, he collected himself and enjoyed his surgery rotation. He found a role model, chief resident James T. Grace, who seemed to know everything pertinent, was bright, enthusiastic, an excellent surgeon and interested in the...
students and residents. He saw gastrectomies, gall bladder and thyroid surgeries, cancer operations of the abdominal region and just knew he would love general surgery.

The year he received his M.D., 1950, coincided with Martha's graduation from Smith College. She majored in American studies, a cosmopolitan field of study but with no apparent commercial value. That was all right; she planned to be a doctor's wife and raise a family. Rainey and Martha were married in June 1950.

Rainey had had a lot going for him. He had been senior class president, made the honor society and had excellent recommendations. Accordingly, he interviewed at top-notch programs in Philadelphia, New York, Boston and Baltimore. "I happened to have lunch with this group of residents at Johns Hopkins and remember telling Martha that they were the damnedest bunch I had ever seen. I thought, this is the place for me."

It was.

During that first year, Rainey had no assigned time off. Martha says she had not known what she was getting into. "That first morning Rainey said he'd call when he got things squared away. Three days later he called, saying it looked like he was going to be a little bit busy."

Since he received no salary, Martha worked as a secretary in downtown Baltimore. "We lived in a little apartment in a row house near the hospital," Martha recalls. "The living room was separated from our bedroom by a stairway leading to the upper floors. The bathroom was in the back, an addition with a dirt floor and no heat."

In his first year, Rainey spent a month on the heart service with the chief, Dr. Alfred Blaylock, one of the world's most eminent surgeons. With the heart-lung machine still years away, almost all of the heart surgeries involved correcting anatomically simple birth defects, but the corrections had to be performed inside the closed, beating heart. It was the only chance the child had, and many of these surgeries were successful.

Through exposure to superb faculty and residents, Rainey understood that their standards were exceptionally high. For the first time, he learned the importance of doing everything right. Shortcuts were to be avoided even though he might be swamped with patients and other responsibilities. In that milieu, before he quite realized it, his standards of practice and conduct mirrored his superiors. They became so ingrained that he could accept no less from anyone either during his ascent at Johns Hopkins or OU.

After two years in the Army, Williams returned to Hopkins in late August 1954. If anything, he was even more motivated than he had been in 1950. By then, he and Martha had two children, Bruce and Alden.

As Williams gained experience and skill, he performed more closed heart procedures. When the surgeries were successful, these critically ill children were restored to health almost immediately. To the families of these children what Williams had done seemed miraculous.

Toward the end of his residency, the heart-lung machine was being introduced, and it was an exciting and painful process. During one stretch, 16 consecutive heart surgery patients died, probably all due to complications arising from the machine. The team worked day and night, trying everything they knew to eliminate problems. Finally, there were some successes, and in 1958 Rainey com-
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He completed his thoracic surgery residency. He signed up at OU for the going rate: $10,000 per year. A short time after the family arrived, a second daughter, Ellen, was born, followed in 1960 by the last of the children, the third George Rainey Williams.

Williams had been hired, in part, to increase the department's research component, and he did not disappoint. He received funding from the National Institutes of Health to study cardiovascular physiology and in 1960 was named a Markle Scholar, which provided additional research support.

The thrust of his research changed in 1962 after he read about the successful reimplantation of a 12-year-old boy's severed arm. "I had already seen several severely damaged limbs from oilfield or farming accidents and thought sooner or later we would have the opportunity to reimplant a limb here."

Within two years, he had the opportunity to use his research data in an attempt to save Bob Swaffar's right arm. The arm had been wrenched away between the elbow and shoulder when this Oklahoma State University basketball player reached into a high-speed, water-extracting clothes dryer. Three hours later, about midnight, Swaffar and his arm, which had been placed in a tub of ice, arrived at University Hospital. A team assembled by Williams was in place.

"Bob was an ideal candidate," Williams says. "He was a trained athlete who at six feet eight had vessels as big as my finger. The accident happened with such force that the structures, except for the bone, looked cut apart, not torn apart. I told Bob we had never done this before, but conditions were favorable, and we wanted to try."

By sunrise, Swaffar's arm was back in place, and within a day or two, the story was reported to the world via news wires. Williams says the arm was by no means normal, but Bob eventually could carry a briefcase and open doors with it.

Throughout the '60s, Williams spent about 80 percent of his surgical time performing heart operations. He also showed administrative ability as vice chair of the surgery department. Williams enlisted state welfare director Lloyd Rader's support in establishing a heart center at Children's Hospital.

Williams could spot potential and did his part to nurture it. He noticed a very bright medical student named Ronald Elkins and, after getting to know him better during a surgical rotation, decided that Elkins had "a surgical personality." That is, Elkins was willing to make timely decisions and act upon them quickly and decisively.

He encouraged Elkins to pursue a first-rate surgery residency program and, when Elkins followed his advice by applying to Johns Hopkins, helped to get the young man accepted. "I had no idea if he would come back to practice here, but the thinking was if we sent enough of our best and brightest out to these outstanding programs, we would get some of them back." Elkins did return to his alma mater in 1971, and he and Williams performed all of the heart surgeries until the crisis year of 1974.

The state legislature did not trust OU's medical center leadership. Since many of the department heads were from out of state, they were dubbed free-spending carpetbaggers by the more provincially minded political opportunists in the legislature. Some of the "outsiders," according to Williams, could inflame legislators just by walking into the room. Out of this estrangement came suspicion and distrust, which led to allegations and investigations.

Because surgery chairman Schilling had seen it all before and would not endure it again, he resigned in mid-1974. Many others resigned for similar reasons; the surgery faculty dipped from eight to three, with three teaching hospitals to cover.

Williams stayed for many reasons, and although he does not remember
prioritizing them, he knew that when the crisis passed compromises would have been fashioned that would enable the institution to emerge with renewed strength. As the new chairman of surgery and chief of staff at University Hospital, Williams represented the interests of the physicians well and fairly, and his reputation for honesty and integrity was enhanced. Some faculty, like Ron Elkins, credited him for holding the hospital together in 1973-74.

Consequently, 1974 was a turning point for Rainey Williams. After he became chair, his immediate priority was to recruit good faculty. As a Markle Scholar, he had met "a disproportionate number of leaders in academic medicine," and he used those contacts to identify and lure several excellent faculty.

In 1981, when the dean of OU's medical school resigned, many faculty members asked Williams to apply. He was not interested; he was happy performing surgeries, teaching residents and students and running the department. He did accept an appointment as interim dean for 1981-82, and on two other occasions during the '80s.

Williams kept the medical school on an even keel—no mean feat for a population of bright, clever, dynamic, compulsive, talented, ambitious, yet often jealous and egotistical people—who were all subordinate to regents and legislators. The dynamics, pressures and challenges were unrelenting.

What he did not do was mix well or often with public officials. "No question, I should have spent more time with those people shooting the breeze, but I've always hated politics."

Whether Williams is dealing with legislators or surgery residents, there are no degrees or modifications of honesty. "Residents who have lied to me or others have not had their contracts renewed," he says.

Such discrimination has contributed to the excellence of OU's surgical residency program. In recent years, Williams received more than 100 applications for three slots in general surgery.

During the '80s, Williams wore his tux more often than ever as he appeared at dinners and ceremonies honoring him for career achievements. He was inducted into the

An all-round sportsman, Williams loves hunting and fishing and is a skilled builder of model ships.

Oklahoma Hall of Fame in 1986; elected to the Johns Hopkins Society of Scholars; received the University's highest honor, the Distinguished Service Citation; and in 1991 won the $10,000 prize that accompanies OU's Stanton L. Young Master Teacher Award. Less official and public honors have meant as much or more. Three of his former surgery residents have named children Rainey.

Further evidence of Williams' place in the hearts of his former residents came last fall. More than 100 of this group contributed a total $400,000 to establish the G. Rainey Williams Research Professorship at OU.

Now, in 1996, a building had been named for him. And during the ceremony, he was presented a chair with an engraved name plate, emblematic of the establishment of the G. Rainey Williams Chair in Surgical Oncology. To fulfill the endowment requirement, the University needed to raise a minimum $500,000, which would be matched by the state regents. By year's end, an amazing $1.8 million had been raised toward a new goal of $2 million.

By then, he had retired—a little earlier than he had planned. In May, Williams was diagnosed with colon cancer. The next day he performed his last surgery and announced his retirement. A day or two later, he was himself on the table, having part of his colon removed, only to discover the cancer had spread to his liver. Since then, he has completed six rounds of chemotherapy, which has kept his disease under control. More chemotherapy will not cure him, though it may give him several more good months, to bird hunt or fish with his friends or perhaps travel with Martha one last time to a favorite place.

Williams still spends a few hours a day in his office, even during the bad days following the chemotherapy infusion. He reads and answers his mail and talks with visitors who stop by to chat. There is no anger or self-pity in him. He remains the courtly southern gentleman. At about noon, he drives home, still mindful of his many blessings.