

Whether serving as a doctor in a remote village on Alaska's Nushagak Bay or as a U.S. diplomat in Geneva, Switzerland, Covenanter **Robert Fortuine** has tried to live his life as a witness to God's love and care.

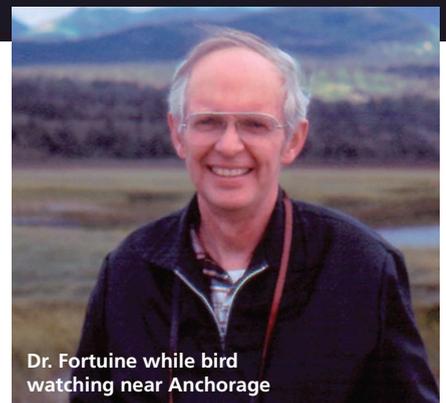
# A Great Joy in Serving

ROB HALL

**I**n 1980, while serving as a U.S. diplomat, Robert Fortuine was invited to a meeting of the World Health Organization (WHO). Smallpox, one of the greatest killers in human history, had finally been defeated and the WHO was celebrating.

"The WHO had been trying for ten to fifteen years to eradicate small pox," says Fortuine, a member of Mat-Su Covenant Church in Wasilla, Alaska. "They had done their research and had found no wild strains of the disease for three years, so they made their announcement. A large parchment was brought in and the WHO member organizations signed it. It was an exciting thing to be a part of."

Two years later, Fortuine was serving as chief medical officer at the North Krome Processing Center in Miami, Florida, treating recent Haitian immigrants. A number of them had cases of Kaposi's Sarcoma, a relatively rare form



Dr. Fortuine while bird watching near Anchorage

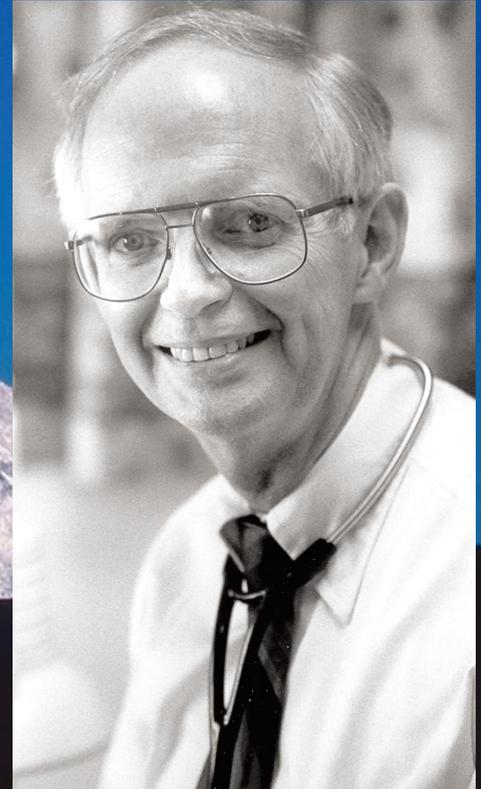
of cancer at that time. The Centers for Disease Control sent a team to investigate what turned out to be one of the first outbreaks of AIDS.

"So I was at the death of one epidemic and the birth of another," says Fortuine. "It reminded me that in the field of public health, you tamp down one disease only to see another rise up to take its place."

### **A lifelong calling**

Now retired, Fortuine and his wife, Sheila, live in a modest home on East

Scenes from Fortune's career (clockwise from top left): in arctic gear while in Bethel, Alaska in 1967; with diplomats in Geneva, including the director general of the WHO; a portrait from the 1980s; in his public health service uniform; treating a patient in the 1980s



Birch Drive in Wasilla with their two dogs, Bonnie and Clyde. Set on a hill, the home has a stunning view of the mountains, but is, like Fortune himself, surprisingly unassuming.

A third-generation physician, Fortune says that medicine is “the family business.” But growing up, his future seemed uncertain—Fortune was only ten years old when his father died. “My mother was a nurse and after my dad died she worked at a local nursing home and took in boarders during the summer,” he says. “Still it was hard and there was a danger that our family would not be able to stay together.”

Fortune was eventually able to attend Phillips Exeter Academy, about thirty miles from his hometown of Ogunquit, Maine. There he earned a prestigious scholarship. “To this day I do not know why I was nominated by the faculty for this scholarship,” he says, “but it paid for my tuition from Exeter through medical school. With-

out it I probably would not have been able to go to college, much less medical school.”

After Exeter, Fortune enrolled at Cornell University. A German literature major with a minor in classical Greek (he speaks four languages and can read eight), Fortune thought about pursuing a career in academia. Then he read a book on Albert Schweitzer, the Nobel Prize-winning missionary doctor and theologian.

“That book changed my life,” he says. “During my senior year I read thirteen books on Schweitzer, drinking deep at the well of his life.”

Fortune could resonate with Schweitzer’s struggle between remaining in academia or serving others by “loving with his hands.”

Schweitzer’s influence on Fortune would be lifelong—he has more than 150 books by or about Schweitzer, including two he proudly proclaims are autographed by Schweitzer.

Fortune also became acquainted with the work of Wilfred Grenfell, a medical missionary who worked in Newfoundland. Grenfell had been converted while attending a rally led by Dwight L. Moody. Like Schweitzer, Grenfell believed the direct care of people was the best way to serve. Unlike Schweitzer, Grenfell enjoyed his work.

“Schweitzer served because he felt like he had to. Grenfell found great joy in serving,” Fortune says.

Around the same time, Fortune was struggling with faith. He had grown up in the Baptist church and attended services while at Exeter. As a college student he dropped out of the church. In the fall of 1954, on the tenth anniversary of his father’s death, Fortune felt himself depressed and went for a drive to a state park where he could

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**Founding fathers of the Amundsen Educational Center in Soldotna. From left: Don Bruckner, Maynard Londborg, Roald Amundsen, and Robert Fortuine (2002)**

walk and think.

Deciding to cut short his walk, Fortuine tried to climb a hill to get back to his car. As he struggled up the hill, taking three steps forward before falling two back, he saw the experience as a metaphor for his life. Reaching the top of the hill, he was treated to the most beautiful sunset he had ever seen.

As he continued his walk, Fortuine startled a deer, which a hunter was about to shoot. While the hunter was angry, Fortuine was pleased to have saved the deer. On the ride back to school Beethoven's Ninth Symphony was playing on the radio. All of these events lifted Fortuine's depression. He was convinced that God was speaking to him in a profound way.

After leaving Cornell, Fortuine enrolled at McGill University in Montreal, one of the top medical schools in North America (and the closest to his home in Maine). There he met Sheila, who was studying to be a nurse in hopes of serving as a missionary in northern Canada. Fortuine had similar dreams—he hoped to serve as a doctor among Alaska Natives.

When he finished medical school, Fortuine fulfilled his military obligations as an officer in the U.S. Public Health Service. In the spring of 1961, he was commissioned as a senior assistant surgeon and assigned to the Public Health Service Indian Hospital in Belcourt, North Dakota. It was a difficult time, as tensions were high between Native Americans and whites in the community.

Two years later, the Fortuines were assigned to Kakanak, Alaska. "It was the most difficult, yet stimulating time of my life," Fortuine says. "At that time

I had only done an internship, I did not do a residency because my military deferment was up. This meant that at times I was in over my head and was expected to do things without having a lot of practice. During one of my first field trips to the villages I had to do a solo appendectomy without the benefit of an anesthesiologist. It was only the second appendectomy I had done," Fortuine says. "It was exciting, yet stressful as all the doctors were being asked to do more than we were trained to do."

After being transferred to Bethel, the Fortuines joined a Moravian church. "It was not till I got to Alaska that I started getting something out of church and completed my return to faith," he says. The Moravian missionaries impressed Fortuine with how they lived their faith.

As Fortuine's responsibilities increased, so did his need for additional training. So he and Sheila left Alaska for a three-year residency program. He earned a degree in public health from Harvard, and served as assistant to the chief resident of the Indian Health Service in Silver Springs, Maryland.

After completing his residency Fortuine was offered his "dream job" as director of public health services at the Alaska Native Medical Center in Anchorage. It was there that the Fortuines were introduced to the Covenant through a fellow doctor who attended First Covenant Church in Anchorage.

This would begin a twenty-five year relationship with First Covenant. The Fortuines would become active members, holding a variety of leadership positions, before moving on to Mat-su Covenant when

they retired.

After six years at the center, Fortuine was offered the position of international health attaché in Geneva, Switzerland. His years of service in Alaska, coupled with his aptitude for languages, made him an excellent candidate. The position was a diplomatic post that called on Fortuine to serve as liaison officer between the U.S. government and the WHO. In his role Fortuine was able to attend the WHO meeting in which it was announced that small pox had been eradicated.

There were also low points during his time of service. The WHO was concerned about companies that encouraged women in the developing world to feed their babies formula rather than breast milk. Without access to sterilized water, the formula would become contaminated, leading to many infant deaths. Most WHO member organizations signed a statement condemning the practice. The U.S. refused to do so, says Fortuine, due to the lobbying influence of drug companies.

"I felt like I was losing my soul," he says. "As a diplomat I had to give the party line even if it conflicted with my conscience. The longer I was there the more frustrated I became. I began to wonder what had happened to the idealistic young doctor who had gone to Kakanak all those years ago."

So Fortuine decided to leave the diplomatic corps. "Some of my friends were incredulous," he says. "They won-

dered why I wanted to leave the high life of diplomatic service. It seemed so phony to me. The WHO was founded to help Third World countries, but the diplomats seemed more concerned about their cocktail parties than the needs of the people.”

Fortuine was offered a position as an assistant to the surgeon general, but he wanted to go back to Alaska. So he accepted a position as a family physician in Anchorage. He also became involved with Covenant World Relief (CWR).

“After my time in Geneva,” he says, “I was different. I enjoyed working with patients more, I took more time to be with them. I am not an evangelist, but I tried to live my life in a way that allowed God to show through. I let my life be my argument about why people need God. I am not comfortable debating theology, but I do feel comfortable in living a life in line with my faith.”

While in the lower forty-eight for a CWR meeting, Fortuine had a first of what would be an on-going series of heart problems that would ultimately cut his medical career short.

“I was staying in a hotel in Skokie [Illinois],” he says, “and I decided to walk to a Lutheran church about a mile from the hotel for Sunday services. I did not get far before I realized I was not doing well. I returned to my room and called an ambulance since I could tell I was having a heart event.” He was indeed having heart trouble and spent time in a local hospital.

Those heart problems would force Fortuine to retire in 1987, at fifty-four. He had spent twenty-six years of service with U.S. Public Health.

Not being the retiring type, Fortuine

launched himself into a series of new projects. He volunteered with Native Health Services and began teaching in the WWAMI (Washington, Wyoming, Alaska, Montana, Idaho) Medical Education Program. He also began writing about Alaskan history, one of his passions.

One of his first projects was *Chills and Fever: Health and Disease in the Early History of Alaska*, which earned him the



Sheila and Robert Fortuine

first of two Alaska Historian of the Year awards. He laughs when recalling the book: *Chills and Fever* was his tongue-in-cheek working title. His publisher liked it so much that they kept it. The success of *Chills and Fever* and its acceptance by Alaska Natives surprised Fortuine.

“I was tired of hearing people say that Alaska Natives were in pristine health before Europeans settlers arrived,” he says. “The truth is Alaska Natives were sick before the Europeans arrived. Alaska history books tend to ignore the impact of disease so I wanted to write a sympathetic account of the plight of Alaska Natives, while at the same time not agreeing with all their conclusions.”

In 2005 Fortuine won his second Alaska Historian of the year award

for *Must We All Die?: Alaska’s Enduring Struggle with Tuberculosis*.

Fortuine’s favorite book is *The Words of Medicine—Sources, Meanings, and Delights*. Fortuine’s love of languages comes through in this book, which looks into the origin of such diverse words and phrases as arachnophobia and Peter Pan Syndrome. He admits that it “has not sold very well.”

As a retired public health doctor, Fortuine can be treated at the Alaska Native Medical Center. Diagnosed recently with cancer, he was welcomed by many of his former patients. “When I was getting cancer treatments, I would go to the medical center for treatment,” he says. “Going to a hospital for a chemo treatment is never pleasurable, but it was made more tolerable by the fact that people who I had treated would remember me and come and give me a hug

and thank me for my service.”

At an Evangelical Covenant Church of Alaska meeting in Wasilla a few years ago, Hugh Forbes, a native of Bethel who now pastors the Covenant church there, sought out Fortuine. Forbes wanted to shake the hand of the doctor who had delivered him and signed his birth certificate.

“I got a kick out of his seeking me out just because I had been his mother’s doctor,” says Fortuine.

Fortuine’s life has spoken louder than his words ever could, says Byron Bruckner, director of Covenant Youth of Alaska. “Robert Fortuine is the most intelligent, generous, humble Christian man you will ever meet,” Bruckner says. “He is a Covenant treasure, one of its best kept secrets, tucked away in Alaska like a nugget of gold.” □