A PASSION FOR EXCELLENCE; U OF L DOCTOR LEAVES ENDURING MARK TRAINING SURGEONS
(By Laura Ungar)

Part drill sergeant, part modern-day Socrates, Dr. brigadier medical residents and students through University Hospital on early morning rounds this week.

Stopping in front of patients' rooms, Polk called on residents to describe each case, then peppered them with questions.

Sometimes he offered a compliment, such as "Well done," or "That's pretty good right." But more often, he displayed a characteristic toughness, and his trainees usually answered, "Yes, sir."

"You're lost," he admonished the group outside one patient's room.

"You're not betting your life," he said to a resident assessing a patient. "You're betting his life!"

Polk is stepping down today after more than three decades as chairman of the University of Louisville's surgery department, where he is a herculean figure of surgery—about 230, which U of L officials say is more than any other current surgical chair in the country.

Colleagues say Polk's reluctance for excellence marked Polk's tenure. That has given U of L's program a national reputation as the Martine Corps of surgical residences and left him with a nickname based on one instance from his early career: "Hiram Fire- em."

But it also has made him a teacher students always remember, a strict father-figure who strives to make them better and leaves them with an internal voice telling them to push themselves.

"Dr. Polk expects excellence from his trainees and will not accept mediocrity. And by demanding it, he often gets it," said Dr. Kelly McMasters, a former resident under Polk who is now the Sam and Lolita Weakley Professor of Surgical Oncology and director of U of L's division of surgical oncology.

"He could go a little too far, "could be too tough," said Dr. Frank Miller, a professor of surgery at U of L. But Polk makes no apologies. Surgery "is a serious business and you need to take that seriously," he said. "Striving to be the best you can be sometimes means telling people, 'I think that's stupid.'"

Colleagues say Polk, 68, held himself to those same high standards as he has helped build a nationally renowned surgery department.

He has written or co-written hundreds of book chapters and numerous books, and those same high standards as he has helped build a nationally renowned surgery department at U of L.

"I think that's stupid." "No question about it," Mitchell said, "he was demanding it."

But Polk was mindful of tailoring questions to a trainee's level of understanding, recalled Dr. Gordon Tobin, a U of L professor and past chairman of plastic and reconstructive surgery.

"He fit right in with the other surgeons I met in that era," Tobin said. "The surgical personality is very straightforward and blunt."

Polk's reputation for demanding excellence was a draw for some, said Dr. J. David Richardson, a professor and past chairman of U of L's surgery department.

"We want people who are going to take the profession seriously and make it a passion," Richardson said. "It's not a place to come and rest on your laurels and enjoy a quiet kind of life."

Dr. William H. Mitchell, a retired surgeon in Richmond, Ky., was among Polk's early residents. He said Polk expected him and his peers to be on their game at 7 a.m. "whether we were bright-eyed and bushy-tailed or not."

"If you ran out of gas, you'd better get pumped up. You were expected to be cogent, coherent and well thought out," Mitchell said.

But Polk was mindful of tailoring questions to a trainee's level of understanding. Mitchell said, and would be hardest on senior residents, many doctors-in-training saw something beneath the harshness—intelligence, skill and passion for his work. Mitchell remembers a case presented in a conference in which another resident stabilized the fractured jaw of a motorcycle accident victim without calling for backup, even though he had never seen such a fracture.

"He fried him," Mitchell said of Polk's response. "He said: Don't undertake something you've never done without backup."

"No question," Richardson said, "he made all of us better doctors because he made us think about what we're doing."

FAMILY—AND HORSES

Nurturing residents and building a department required long hours, attending sporting events with them and talking medicine with two who have expressed an interest.

"He was busy and gone a lot," said his daughter, Susan Brown, one of two children with his first wife. "My mom kept everything running."

That didn't change her love and admiration for him, said Brown, 44. And she said he has taken an active interest in the lives of her three sons, attending sporting events with them and talking medicine with two who have expressed an interest.

"He reinforced some of what my father taught me," Mitchell said. "He said I ought to go and find my role in this profession."

Polk's second wife, said she understands the long hours and is a workaholic herself. She said Polk routinely gets telephone calls at their East End home from doctors around the country asking for professional and personal advice—and sees this as a compliment, evidence of the relationships he has built over the years.

Some of Polk's rare hours outside of work have been focused on his love of horses. He and Richardson together are owner-breeders of Thoroughbreds cherished for their speed and grace.

Richardson sees things in common between surgery and the horse business, such as the reminders, every time a horse gets hurt, of the fragility of life and success. Polk sees common points, too, but noted: "A good horse is better than a good resident. You love them, and they try hard to be the best they can be."