## Special Issue in Honor of J. Randall Curtis, MD, MPH

# What Does it Mean to be an Excellent Mentor? J. Randall "Randy" Curtis' Living Legacy



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## Key Words

Palliative care, mentoring, legacy

#### **Introduction**

"Before my (ALS) diagnosis, I used to think of my legacy as the papers I had published and the impact that my research has had on the field of medicine. Since my diagnosis, my thinking has changed. I now see my legacy as the people I have mentored and helped mentor and the people that they have mentored. This vision of legacy gives me much more joy and happiness than my old vision of legacy."—J. Randall Curtis, UW Medicine Huddle, December 6,2021.<sup>1</sup>

In this narrative essay, we, eleven graduates of the University of Washington's T32 training program in palliative care and/or K12 program in implementation science<sup>2</sup> and Co-Director of the Cambia Palliative Care Center of Excellence (EKK), share our experiences as research mentees of Dr. Randy Curtis. This essay includes a composite of our reflective writing on what Randy's mentorship has meant to us. To develop this piece, we each created our own individual narrative reflective essays, using Dr. Curtis' recent interview on the GeriPal podcast as a prompt, and framework.<sup>3</sup> Then, we compiled brief excerpts, and used multiple methods (see Fig. 1) to display our shared thoughts in honor of our mentor. Our hope is you will see the enduring legacy his mentorship has provided us—a gift for which we will always be grateful.

## Focusing on What is Most Important

It turns out that Randy is the mentor I didn't know I needed. People often talk about the hidden curriculum-lessons that, for better or worse, are learned but not always intended. . . . I think Randy's hidden curriculum was how to live a good life as a health researcher. Since his diagnosis it has become much more explicit, creating space for me and other mentees to reflect on what is most important for us and to make plans to focus more on those things in all areas of our lives (EB).

As I listened to Randy's words during the interview, I hear the deep wisdom and focus that make Randy such an exceptional mentor and person. His unwavering commitment to his mentees: even faced with his own mortality, supporting his mentees is a top priority. His determination to focus on what's important and put everything else aside: this goes for research and your non-work life. And, to truly support and lift up those you mentor, you need to really listen, facilitate reflection, and manage expectations (MRT).

#### Commitment to Mentees

Randy became my mentor when I was a bit adrift, having decided to change my research focus, and move beyond a previous mentoring relationship. He cared about me as a person, understood my needs and values, and steered me towards practical, fundable ideas while sponsoring me for multiple awards. His support buoyed me during a difficult time and helped me understand my best path forward, aligned with my goals, values, and interests. He centered my needs and validated my experiences, which was vital to my success (CLM).

The work is about the people, and I've always felt that Randy genuinely cares about me as a mentee and

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Fig. 1. Word cloud derived using common terms and phrases from the authors' individual reflections of Randy's mentorship.

as a person. Randy has an uncanny ability to help mentees get to the heart of the issues and improve their science regardless of their specific focus. I thank Randy for encouraging me to find my "why," coaching me through professional obstacles, and perhaps the most important lesson of all — doing it all with warmth, kindness, and compassion (NL).

Randy demonstrates that mentorship means supporting the whole person. He cares about and understands my personal and professional goals. He actively works to help me achieve and find balance between them. His professional experience and ability to consider my goals and perspective provides clarity in the face of difficult career decisions. His honesty is key, helping to cut to the crux of big decisions... Sharing my disappointment when I experience setbacks conveys that Randy cares about me as a person, and his words of encouragement help me press on (MEM).

I am struck by the greatness of the community Randy has cultivated. He is adored and respected by so many, and his influence and wisdom are impressive. The incredible worth he places on relationships is something I admire. From Randy, I have learned that the power of collaboration is tremendous, and teamwork with great people produces beautiful results (AS).

## Moving Forward and Prioritizing

Randy says not to wait for serious illness, with its accompanying reduced capacity to focus, to hone your ability to focus on planning, and achieving your goals. Amidst the chaos of everyday life these days, I've found these words to be very helpful and incredibly

meaningful in moving my career, and life more generally, in a forward positive direction (GMB).

While a cornerstone of Randy's mentorship has always been to align my research with what I am passionate about, he also regularly reminds me that I need to be to be in a mental place where I can successfully do this. This means clarifying my professional and personal priorities and creating boundaries so that I can be the best person I can in both spheres. To me, this has meant focusing on work that aligns with my research and professional goals, and prioritizing quality time with my family (CEB).

## Listening and Support

The time Randy gave me to focus on my grant during post-doc was invaluable. His words of encouragement at key turning points in my career are priceless to me. Randy's immense support and resources have allowed me to be where I am today. Randy's time listening to me was and is truly appreciated (HC).

Palliative care is a life approach. There are parallels between this and mentorship—listening and helping people figure out what is most important. As to legacy—in the GeriPal interview, Randy gave his mentees the credit for his (favorite) papers' success—because that's what he does. He empowers people to accomplish their dreams and he supports them when they're struggling until they can fly (JMS).

I love how Randy finds so many parallels between being a good mentor and being a good palliative care clinician. Ultimately, both boil down to understanding your mentee or your patient's goals, helping them reconcile those goals with the realities they face, and identifying ways for them to move forward in alignment with those goals. As someone who has worked with Randy as both a research mentee and a clinician trainee, he has truly remarkable skills in both arenas... Randy's voice has always been the "home button" that brings focus to the discussion, identifies the goals and values that unite us, and finds pragmatic strategies for moving forward. I admire how Randy has identified LISTENING as the key to the clarity his voice always seems to bring—in his patient care, in his research, and in his mentor-ship. I will miss his voice (RYL).

## Final Thoughts

Anyone who is lucky enough to count themselves a mentee of Randy Curtis' is undeniably better for it. I am so grateful to have the opportunity to learn from this remarkable person (MRT).

I am and will be forever grateful for the opportunity to be one of Randy's mentees—it has changed my life and work for the better (EB).

I consider myself and the palliative care community to be so incredibly blessed to have such a thoughtful, generous, giving human being as a leader, investigator, and mentor (RYL).

Whether it be family or our research teams, our relationships become our strongest legacy. I thank Randy for welcoming me into his palliative care research community. His community and wisdom are gifts I will cherish throughout my career and life (AS).

Notes:

<sup>1</sup>Available at http://huddle.uwmedicine.org/randy-curtis-palliative-care-perspective. Last accessed January 3.

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<sup>3</sup>Living with and studying serious illness: Podcast with Randy Curtis. Available at http://geripal.org/living-with-and-studying-serious-illness-pocast-with-randy-curtis. Last accessed December 20, 2021. Funding for the GeriPal podcast is provided by Archstone Foundation.

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