Twenty Years Later, “Dean of Deans” Still Going Strong

In the summer of 1990, Richard Krugman was looking forward to taking a sabbatical to Belgium.

Nearly 22 years later, he’s still waiting to take the trip. Krugman was unexpectedly named interim dean of the University of Colorado School of Medicine that summer – a job he initially thought he’d have for a year.

It lasted a bit longer. On March 1 this year, Krugman celebrated his 20th permanent year in the position, making him the longest-serving medical school dean in the country. He downplays the achievement, pointing out he only recently took the honor from Charles McKown, Jr. McKown served as dean of the Marshall University School of Medicine for 22 years before moving on to another position with the university in 2011.

Nonetheless, Krugman has seen many presidents and chancellors come and go since his first day as permanent dean on March 1, 1992. He’s worked through interdepartmental infighting, rocky fiscal times, the historic move from Ninth Avenue to the Anschutz Medical Campus and much more.

He freely admits he knew little or nothing about the job when he took it, but was willing to learn.

“I thought I knew [the job] but I didn’t. Everything in the school is department-based. I knew pediatrics. My father was a pediatrician. I came into [leading] a complex place with 21 different departments. I had to learn to think, solve problems and communicate differently.”

Out of the blue. Back in 1990, he never saw it coming. That summer seemed an ideal time for a break. Krugman had been vice chairman for clinical affairs in the Department of Pediatrics at the School of Medicine. In March of that year, however, the department switched its affiliation from Colorado General Hospital – which would become University of Colorado Hospital

Richard Krugman, MD, dean of the CU School of Medicine in his office in Building 500. Krugman celebrated 20 years in the job last March, making him the longest-serving medical school dean in the country.

in 1991 – to The Children’s Hospital (now Children’s Hospital Colorado). Krugman stepped down from the position.

That freed up some time. Krugman, who had been director of the C. Henry Kempe National Center for the Prevention and Treatment of Child Abuse and Neglect since 1981, decided he would visit Belgium to see what he could learn from a country he thought was doing a far better job of protecting children than was the U.S.

But on July 2, he got a call from Bernard Nelson, MD, then chancellor of the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center, that changed the course of his career. Nelson needed to replace Eugene Jacobson, MD, who had resigned as dean of the School of Medicine.

When Nelson asked Krugman to “stop by the house” to speak with him, Krugman thought the chancellor would ask him for recommendations for a new dean. But it turned out it was Krugman that Nelson had in mind for the position.

Krugman’s response? “I told him, ‘I’m going to Belgium.’”
Bring us together. But Nelson insisted, telling Krugman he was dealing with two “warring factions” in the School of Medicine. When Nelson asked for recommendations for dean from each of the factions, Krugman wound up fifth on one, thirteenth on another. Krugman said that didn’t sound very impressive.

“But you were the only one who wound up on both lists,” Nelson replied.

“That was a ringing endorsement,” Krugman says, “but I told him ‘I’m still going to Belgium.’”

Still, after talking it over with his family – the third of his four sons, then 16, strongly advocated for taking the job if it included a raise and a car, which it did – Krugman decided to accept the job.

“I figured I could do anything for a year,” he recalls.

Welcome. Within the first hour of the first day, he says, he learned how tough the job would be. His first meeting was with Lilly Marks, now vice president for health affairs and executive vice chancellor for the Anschutz Medical Campus, but at that time the School of Medicine’s associate dean for finance.

After congratulating Krugman on his new position, Marks informed him that the move of pediatrics to The Children’s Hospital had created 30 percent revenue holes in pathology, radiology and other services. In addition, she said, the Academic Enrichment Fund, which supported all Health Sciences Center research, was in very precarious financial shape.

“That was in hour one of day one,” Krugman says.

Far from being discouraged, he moved forward. “It seemed like there was stuff to do,” he says simply. “I thought we could fix three or four things in a couple of years.”

He still held his position at the Kempe Center, reasoning he’d be back full time at his work in pediatrics and child abuse prevention before long – that nobody lasts in the dean’s job more than two or three years.

Lessons in collaboration. As it turned out, Krugman says, his years of work with child protection teams served him very well as dean of the School of Medicine, where he had to balance many competing interests.

On those teams, he explains, physicians, psychiatrists, police, district attorneys, judges, teachers and social workers learn to work collaboratively in the interests of the child.

“You learn to think differently to solve problems,” he says. “It works because you figure out how to use the strengths of each discipline to move toward a common good – to recognize if there is abuse and how to treat it. You work together to understand each other.”

Chairs, not a set. In the School of Medicine of 20-plus years ago, Krugman says he too often saw the antithesis of collaboration.

“We had 21 department chairs not working together,” he remembers. “Several of them hated each other. The school was a convenient carrying case for 21 departments, each of which had the goal of being one of the top 10 departments in the country without regard to whom they had to cannibalize to get the resources needed.”

He says he worked steadily to “develop a sense of school,” a job that became easier after he was named dean on a permanent basis. At that point, he began steadily adding department chairs and faculty willing to collaborate and invest their time in developing the school as a whole, not simply their own departments or careers.

As for another perennially sore spot, the state’s lack of higher-education funding, Krugman says he learned early on not to dwell on it. He cites the “Stockdale Paradox,” named by author Jim Collins for the coping mechanism of James Stockdale, a prisoner of war in Vietnam for more than five years. Stockdale survived not by being optimistic but by accepting his circumstances as they were and persevering in spite of them.

Likewise, Krugman says, the School of Medicine has learned to “accept the brutal reality of our present circumstances without giving up hope of prevailing in the end.”

And prevail it has. The Academic Enrichment Fund today stands at $253 million. The thriving clinical enterprise supports essentially all the school’s research and education.

He gives a good portion of the credit for that success to the decision to move the health sciences schools from Ninth Avenue to the Anschutz Medical Campus in 2008 – three years ahead of schedule.

“It’s been fabulous,” he says. “The campus is a magnet, and [UCH] is thriving. Our challenges now are in providing clinical access and care at the levels that the many people who want to come here expect.”

As to his own future, Krugman says he moves ahead day by day. In 1998, he recalls, he concluded a three-year contract. He went through a “360 review” of his performance, after which he was told his employment status was at will.

“I said at the time, ‘That’s fine. I’m on my way to Belgium,’” he says.

The reservations are still waiting.