THE FACULTY OF MEDICINE
Harvard University

Jack Richard Ewalt

Jack Richard Ewalt, Bullard Professor of Psychiatry, Emeritus, who died on November 23,1998 defied most of the psychiatric stereotypes. He drove racing cars, wore cowboy boots and carried a gun. He was impatient and brusque, did not mince words or suffer fools gladly, and he frightened people, although, in truth, his associates at the Massachusetts Mental Health Center (MMHC), a constantly threatened institution, felt protected by his capacity for confrontation. Yet he was a brilliant clinician who cared deeply about very sick patients who were shunned by the public and many a psychiatrist. He was also a great teacher who was fiercely supportive of talented young people; and he was a consummate academic tactician who forged a world-class institution out of unpromising raw materials.

His true worth lay in effectiveness, not affection, but he was deeply trusted where it counted – by a great many patients with severe disorders, by his close colleagues, young and old, and by influential political figures. Within psychiatry, he was a national leader amidst a colorful, talented group of post World War II psychiatrists who moved psychiatry beyond the asylum and set it on a new course of scientific investigation, humane social concern and participation in the main stream of American legal, political and cultural life.

Jack was born January 27, 1910 in Medicine Lodge, Kansas, the home of Carrie Nation, the flamboyant founder of the Women's Christian Temperance Union and a family acquaintance. His father, who owned a lumber business and raced quarter horses, died suddenly when Jack was 15 years old. Although the youngest of three children, Jack was so smart and up and coming that a judge declared him an adult so that he could manage his father's remaining affairs. Because times were hard, he and his mother moved to Boulder, Colorado where she opened a boarding house and he attended prep school while working at odd

jobs to help support the family. Economic hardship and his own impatience put him through college and medical school on the fast track. He graduated from the University of Colorado School of Medicine when he was 23 and finished his psychiatric training at the Colorado Psychopathic Hospital four years later. During psychiatric residency his fortunes had improved sufficiently so that he owned a midget car racing team, hiring his own driver to take the wheel.

He joined the University of Colorado psychiatric faculty and had reached the rank of Assistant Professor when, in 1941, he was recruited to the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston. By 1945, he was Professor of Neuropsychiatry and Director of the Psychopathic Hospital at the University, with a steady stream of publications on the fever therapy of advanced syphilis, chorea, the electroencephalogram, and the application of psychiatric practice to medical conditions. Advancing rapidly as an administrator, his obvious forte, he became director of all of the university hospitals associated with the medical school in Galveston in 1949. A year later he moved to Houston as Dean of the University of Texas Postgraduate School of Medicine.

Psychiatric practice that included psychotherapeutic treatments had proved its value in World War II and a group of unusually able psychiatrists returned from military duty, eager to address the failings of organized psychiatry. Most glaring was the tragedy of inadequate patient care in poorly funded, thinly staffed state mental hospitals. To attack this problem, they had to challenge an older generation of psychiatrists whose careers were based in those large custodial institutions. The challengers included Will Menninger, Harry Solomon, Douglas Bond, Kenneth Appel, Leo Bartemeier and, of course, Jack Ewalt. As clinicians they were broadly trained in neurology, psychiatry and psychoanalytic therapies. Their military experience had seasoned them politically and administratively and had given them the confidence to redress the obvious wrongs inflicted on mentally disabled citizens who deserved better.

As a major result of their work, Congress passed the Mental Health Study Act of 1955, which directed the Joint Commission on Mental Illness and Health “to analyze and evaluate the needs and resources of the mentally ill in the United States and make recommendations for a national mental health program.” The Joint Commission enlisted the sponsorship of 36 public and private groups to organize the study – the first such study in U.S. history. The Joint Commission was to be headquartered in Boston, and Jack Ewalt was induced to be its director. The study lasted from 1956-1961; it held hearings with all of the relevant groups across the country, and employed scholars in a broad range of fields. Tenets from many of those fields, such as Economics, were applied, for the first time, to mental health and illness. The Joint Commission Report was released serially in multiple volumes and it launched what some have called the “Third Psychiatric Revolution” equivalent to Pinel’s striking off the chains of the mentally ill in the Parisian asylums of the 1790s.

In 1951, Jack had been persuaded by Harry Solomon, Superintendent of the Boston Psychopathic Hospital (now the MMHC), and Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard, to move to Boston to be appointed Massachusetts Commissioner of Mental Health. In 1959 he and Dr. Solomon traded places. Solomon

became the state Commissioner of Mental Health and Ewalt assumed the chair at Harvard and the MMHC. Changes of leadership always create a stir, but the reaction at the MMHC was unusually apprehensive. Ewalt's Western heritage and cowboy boots; the racing cars, the temperament, and the reputation for fearless action took on mythic dimensions. In fact, when he actually arrived, his first announcement was that nothing would change for six months, and that proved to be largely an accurate forecast.

Jack's arrival at the MMHC coincided with a swelling tide of interest in psychiatry by medical graduates. In some classes at Harvard and other major medical schools, the 1960s saw unprecedented numbers of graduates choosing psychiatry as a specialty. Many of them were the outstanding students in their classes, and the MMHC was able to attract some of the most talented. Jack presided over that tumultuous institution whose direction had been set by Harry Solomon who believed, with Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes "that the best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market." Psychoanalysts fought bitterly with the biologically minded faculty and even more bitterly with each other; both groups disdained social psychiatry and the influence of the therapeutic milieu on patient outcomes. Out of this welter of conflicting dogmas came early research on psychopharmacologic agents, the chemistry of the brain, the role of daycare hospitals, the ward milieu, the biological basis of depression, psychological approaches to autism, and the role of psychotherapy in schizophrenia. Jack's support launched the careers of an unusual number of psychiatric luminaries, including Eric Kandel and Gerald Klerman, other distinguished psychiatric investigators, some of them still at the MMHC, a host of psychiatry department chairs, and directors of the National Institute of Mental Health, the Alcohol Drug and Mental Health Administration, and state mental health systems.

Jack himself participated in the intellectual ferment directly, but not only as an academic impresario. He operated a modest tissue culture laboratory in the MMHC basement, developed a clinical research center to study the role of psychotherapy in treating schizophrenia, and he completed psychoanalytic training at the Boston Psychoanalytic Institute. As a national figure, he became President of most of the major psychiatric organizations – the American Psychiatric Association, the Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry, the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology – and he was a member of the National Institute of Mental Health Advisory Council. During the late 1960s he began the local implementation of the community psychiatry revolution launched by his Joint Commission report. At the MMHC, he created an academic base for community psychiatry by starting a community service on a par with traditional inpatient and outpatient services, and serving as the academic host for the Laboratory of Community Psychiatry, headed by Dr. Gerald Caplan, which was a national resource for academic study, innovation, and training in community psychiatry.

By the fall of 1973, the politics in Massachusetts had changed and so had the role of the Superintendent of the MMHC. With characteristic flair and decisiveness, and leaving a turbulent wake, Jack abruptly left the MMHC to become Senior Associate Dean for Clinical Affairs at HMS, serving with Dean Robert Ebert until 1976 when he moved to Washington, D.C. as Director of the Mental Health and Behavioral

Sciences Service in the Veterans Administration Central Office. During his seven years at the VA he took on the difficult task of developing outreach services for Vietnam veterans as part of a more general move of VA psychiatry away from inpatient care toward a more community-based approach.

In 1984, he retired to Tucson, Arizona with his wife, Kathleen, who was then Chief Nurse at the VA Medical Center there. In retirement, he continued his love affair with fast muscle cars – a bright red Fiero, followed by a "dandy" IROC Z Camaro, which he was still driving gleefully at the age of 80. He politely resisted almost all invitations to participate in psychiatric events, basing his refusals on the principle that "when you aren't running things any more, you should stay away."

In earlier years, when his turbulent personal life caused consternation, he answered his critics bluntly that it was none of their business; an admonition honored by this Memorial Minute Committee. Suffice it to say that he is survived by his third wife, Kathleen, and two daughters, Ann Ewalt Hamilton, M.D. of Riverside, California, and Jean Ewalt, of Albuquerque, New Mexico. He is survived as well by a multitude of recollections and stories told by his colleagues and trainees of a remarkable, unforgettable, and singularly effective man.

Respectfully submitted,

Miles F. Shore, *Chairperson*
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