

Who is Joseph Levenstein?

by Sam Fehrsen, with the help of notes compiled by Stanley Levenstein.

Joseph Henry Levenstein is a man of many talents who has taken a leadership role over many years in many different organisations.

He was born in 1941, and Stanley says, "our family folklore has it that his theatrical career started at the age of three with a rousing performance of 'Oklahoma', which received a rapturous reception from all present (and as we all know, he has never looked back!). It should be mentioned that Joseph was not merely the first-born child and grandchild, but also the first nephew of a large extended family who doted on him and hung onto his every syllable and decibel. This could explain the early origins of his monumental self-confidence and 'chutspa', which has enabled him to wax authoritatively on practically any subject under the sun or break into song at the most unexpected times, much to the amazement of delegates at conferences or patients in crowded waiting rooms!"

A few milestones for orientation:

Joe matriculated from Pinelands High School in 1959, he graduated with an MBChB from the University of Cape Town in 1965, and after internship at Groote Schuur Hospital, he joined his father in general practice in Milnerton in 1967. For the last four years he has been the head of the Department of Family and Community Medicine at Rockford, Illinois, in the USA.

I think of Joe as a leader, an organiser, researcher and teacher. His leadership abilities were already evident to me at medical school. He was three years

after me but his presence was immediately felt on the campus. He was elected to the SRC on the main campus and the next year he became head student of UCT. He was also active in NUSAS and was later elected honorary life member of NUSAS. He says he started smoking his pipe (which he has only recently given up) in those turbulent student years when many colleagues were detained by the security forces. Some times they would sleep in a different place each night to avoid the early morning arrests so popular at that time. The pipe helped concentrate his mind with the work at hand and to not be derailed by fear of the 'force'.

After graduation he made a conscious decision not to pursue a political career but put his energies into his father's general practice and developing the discipline of family medicine in South Africa. He has, in this way, played leadership roles in the Faculty of General Practice of the College of Medicine of South Africa, the SA Academy of Family Practice/Primary Care, many committees of WONCA and the Convocation of UCT.

How does he lead? I agree with Stanley that he has inexhaustible energy, or so it seems. He has an inventive mind and an ability to find a good strategy and make things happen, unlike the other two kinds of people: those who watch things happen and those who wonder what happened! He is a "political animal" who likes concrete action and is skilled in taking the initiative to shape compromises and reconciliations. His definition of 'the possible', extends much further than most".

Joe relates an interaction with a questioning student who was visiting his practice on rotation, that set

him off looking at the process of the consultation. She was not satisfied with the glib answer that his success in dealing with a wide variety of conditions and problems was due to the doctor-patient relationship. She insisted that there must be something more. Something that he could teach her. He then set off on what probably is Joe's biggest contribution to family medicine. After taping many consultations and analysing them, he started to formulate a way of looking at the consultation that was not mechanical, as some previous models were. He discovered new ways of expressing the idea of patient-centredness that Balint and others had put forward. He had always been involved in research from his own practice in many different areas but I think his organisational abilities and his enquiring mind joined to do some unique collaborative studies with other general practitioners. Noteworthy are those in the field of heart disease and drug studies.

Joe was also an enthusiastic teacher and examiner in the discipline. He not only was active in the unit of general practice of UCT but was frequently a visiting lecturer in many places across the globe and a popular and thought-provoking speaker at congresses.

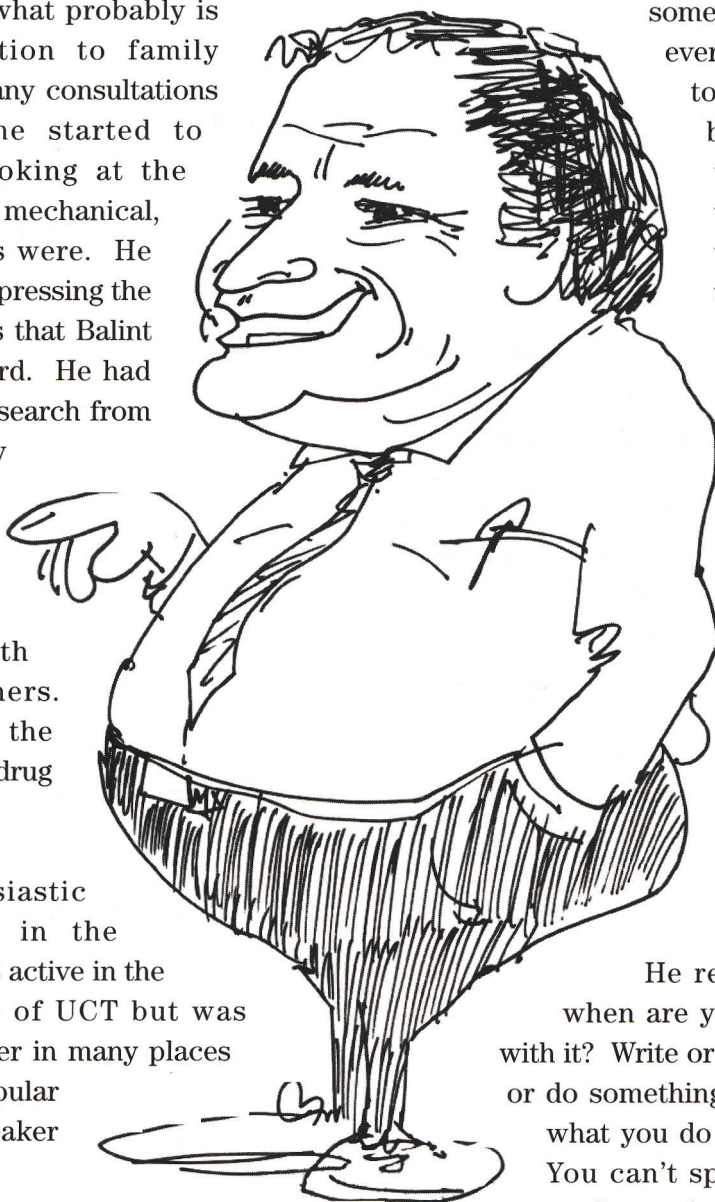
Joe and his charming wife, Yvette, have three sons, one of whom has severe autism and through him they have been active in assisting the Cape Autistic Society in its work.

As already alluded to, Joe is not only a man of politics but also a man of theatre. Stanley says, "he has used his histrionic talents to the full, in a wide variety of situations". If this has inevitably led to the development of an exhibitionist side to his personality, it has toned down

somewhat in recent years. However, he has always been willing to be brought down to earth by friends and relatives who would remind him that he was still 'good old Joe'. He would accept such admonitions with an embarrassed, good-natured, strangely shy smile until his irrepressible elan got the better of him again." Stanley goes on to relate, "my mind goes back to my early years in practice when I joined Joseph (who had already been in practice for quite a few years) and my father. I remember telling Joseph about all my readings and my ideas about how it all related to general practice.

He replied: 'That's great. But when are you going to do something with it? Write or do a research project on it, or do something else with it. I don't care what you do with it, but do something. You can't spend the rest of your life reading and not doing anything about it!'

I join many other people in thanking Joe for helping me to make a few things happen. He gave us confidence to believe that all sorts of things could be made to happen with the necessary application and effort, and he continues to provide living proof of it."



Cartoon of Joseph Levenstein drawn by Prof Louis Hiemstra