We were in my exam room, where I most always see my patients. This was probably the fourth or fifth time I’d seen Carl. He was always intense, yet despite his intensity, there was a softness to his eyes. I could imagine him having thoughtful discussions with his middle-school students. His voice was soft, but direct and clear and firm.

We finished talking about the latest tack his treatment would take, and for once he didn’t seem to have an endless stream of questions. Instead, he sat and thanked me for always taking the time to answer his questions, and said he really appreciated it, it made him feel well cared for. I thanked him. If he only knew what a struggle it sometimes was for me talking to him. He had a bad disease, a malignant brain tumor, and I certainly wanted to take good care of him. I had struggled to make it appear that I had all the time in the world to talk to him.

He subsequently died. The image of his tweed coat, his mustache, his clear gaze, and his words of thanks remain.

By Barbara Gardner, MD

Barbara Gardner, MD, (right) has worked as a neurologist with PMG in Sacramento for 20 years, and is also doing work in palliative care. She is married with three children and has many outside interests, which she juggles with variable success.

Shawna L Swetech, RN, (not pictured) is a medical/surgical nurse at the KP Santa Rosa Medical Center. She has been studying and writing poetry for five years. Ms Swetech finds the magnificence of the human spirit a constant source of inspiration.