

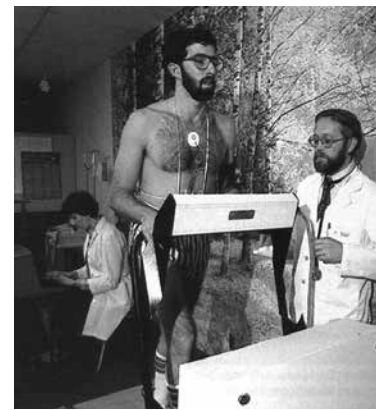
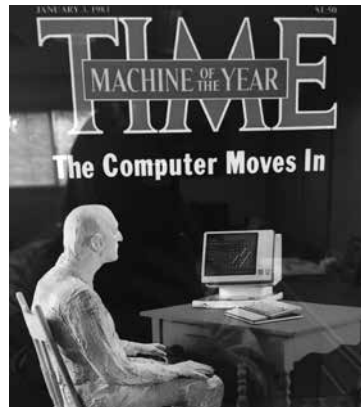
Rebel with a Cause: Don Hall, Father of Corporate Wellness | BY LYNN MCDOWELL

Anyone who knew Don Hall as a sickly twelve-year-old wouldn't have said that his name would become synonymous with "Wellness"—a term that wouldn't be coined for another twenty years. But the boy diagnosed with muscular dystrophy was never one to accept what others thought "unchangeable," and showed early signs of seeing beyond common practice. Don went head-to-head with his doctor, who insisted that Don's vegetarian mother give him meat and lots of it. Don was determined to stand by his principles (how many twelve-year-olds read *Ministry of Healing*, even in the 1950s?), and he wouldn't back down. Demonstrating the combination of conviction and business acumen that would attract corporate giants like Nike to his door, Don decided to do that very Adventist-child thing: he made a deal with God.

Don's deal with God was that if he got better, he'd be a life-long vegetarian—at first blush, not a big stretch for a kid who already was one, except that Don wasn't in the habit of challenging authority. The decision to whole-heartedly pursue the principles in *Ministry of Healing* set the course of Don's personal and professional life. That decision, and a fearless eagerness to try new things—like the first PC computer—resulted in the creation of WellSource, the first company (but far from the last) to use Don's ground-breaking computerized health analysis program. By the time he was thirty-five, Don was in *TIME Magazine*.¹

The Land Before *TIME*

Don's early dedication to Adventism and its health principals led him to prepare as a minister at Walla Walla College. In part because of his medically inexplicable recovery from childhood muscular dystrophy, Don always saw Adventism's emphasis on health as an important part



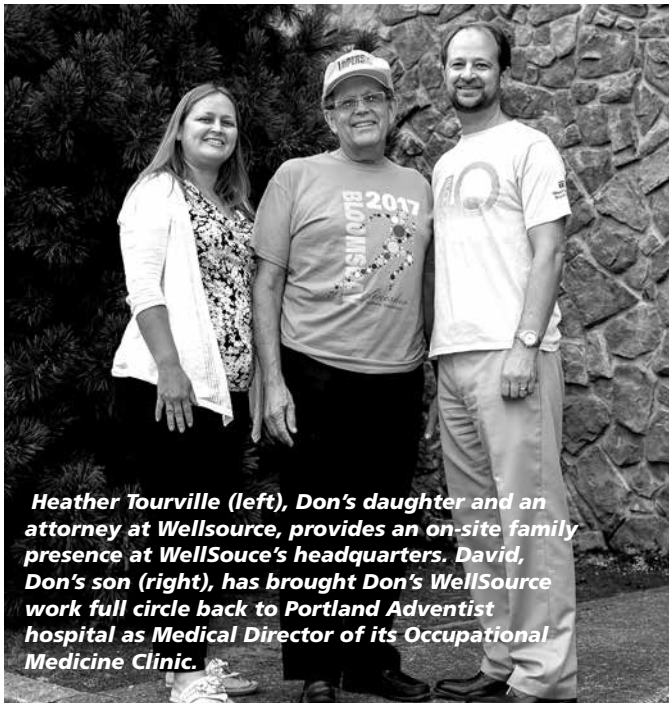
Don Hall in *TIME Magazine*, January 1983

of gospel ministry. So, he was all ears when he heard Loma Linda University's (LLU) Dr. Harding talk about the new School of Public Health—a place where one could become a doctor of health, alongside doctors of medicine. When it came time for Don to go to seminary, he made the case that, as head of Health Ministry for the Upper Columbia Conference, he should take LLU's Master of Public Health in Preventive Care instead. That turned out so well that Don went back to Loma Linda for his doctorate.²

Introducing Adventist Healthcare to the Computer Age

While at LLU, Don developed a computer program called "Health Age," based on factors identified in an Alameda County study showing seven habits linked to longevity. Don, who'd returned to his conference job with his new doctorate in 1978, put his PC—a TRS 80 with an astounding 16K memory—into the conference health van and took his program on the road. Don tested people in parking lots and other unconventional sites, sharing brochures on each of the seven healthy habits and *How to Study the Bible*.

Doors began to open—doors Don hadn't imagined in his wildest dreams, like a seminar series in a Catholic church in Spokane, and a cooperative venture with three hospitals attended by 760 people. More than 300 Eastern Washington University students took his computerized stress evaluation in one day prior to test week. "We had



Heather Tourville (left), Don's daughter and an attorney at WellSource, provides an on-site family presence at WellSource's headquarters. David, Don's son (right), has brought Don's WellSource work full circle back to Portland Adventist hospital as Medical Director of its Occupational Medicine Clinic.

some of the best talks," Don remembers. "They didn't have their guard up."

Word about Don's innovation spread, and Portland Adventist Hospital invited him to do something for their employees. Using a mix of incentives and fun, Don made employee participation the "in" thing, and administration was amazed: work loss time was cut in half. There was a 600% return on the money spent on Don's employee wellness initiative. Within a few months, over 600 hospitals were using Health Age, most of them with no previous connection to Adventism.

Don, now a full-time employee of Portland Adventist Hospital, suggested to its administration that "Corporate Wellness" could be a source of revenue. They didn't see that as part of their mandate, but Don felt strongly about the feasibility and potential to change lives on a grander scale, so they shook hands and Don went off to start WellSource, the company that pioneered Corporate Wellness and computerized health assessment.

Wellness—An Old Idea Whose Time Had Come

"In those days you couldn't even get training in wellness," says Don, so his programmatic approach and ability to get employees to buy in was revolutionary. Throw ground-breaking technology into the mix, and you have a product that "hip" new companies like Nike found irresistible. "Nike's employee recognition awards were fancier than my doctoral certificate," Don grins.

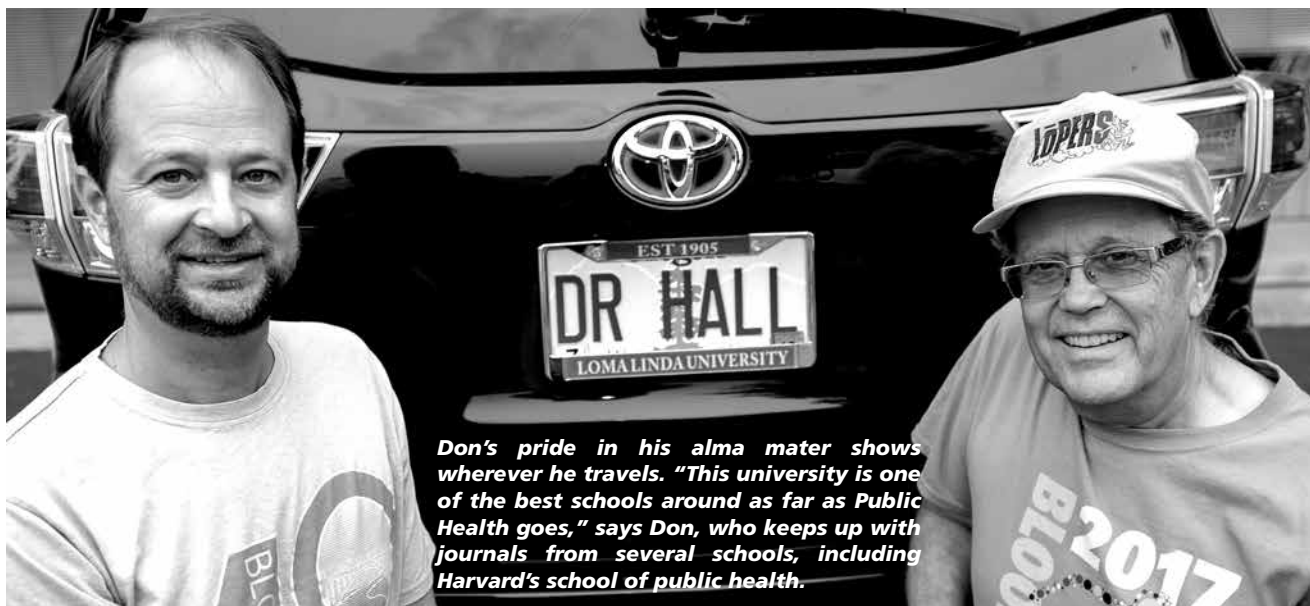
Overnight, the combination of an unprecedented fitness craze, the advent of personal computers, and rare wellness know-how created almost limitless opportunity. All that was required was Don's steady, visionary oversight, networking, and lots of hard work—in short, your average overnight success story.

"When WellSource started in 1980, it was located in my bedroom," recalls Dr. David Hall, medical director of Portland Adventist Hospital's Occupational Medicine Clinic, who, like his father, also holds a Master of Public Health degree from LLU. As Don's eleven-year-old son, he had a ring-side seat on health industry history in the making, and a summer job inputting data as long as he could stand it—which was right through college—alongside his sister, Heather Tourville, who's an attorney at WellSource. Don's computer program, WellSuite, attracted not only Nike, but clients like Vanderbilt University, Safeway, and Aramco. The multiplication factor of individuals impacted is impressive: one insurance client alone enrolled 1.5 million clients in one month.

Long-Term Intergenerational Change

A lifetime of practicing a healthy lifestyle has enabled Don to stay extraordinarily fit (think cycling vacations in Switzerland), and it's become a family lifestyle. For Don and the wife of his youth, Phyllis (who tragically died in a hiking accident), making WellSource a success was a mission as well as a vocation. Both were determined to overcome a genetic predisposition to obesity and avoid related diseases (several relatives died of heart attack). Ensuring that a healthy lifestyle was "normal" for their children was paramount. There are pictures of a family backpacking vacation in the Olympic Mountains when David was six and Heather was months old.

Their dedication paid dividends. Don's kids and grandkids think of plant-based, whole-food eating (Don avoids the term "vegan" so as not to possibly come across as "superior") as normal—like being physically active. And there's another bonus: David's children, McKenzie (12) and Zack (15), look forward to seeing Don and his wife, Trish, visit because it means an active good time. "They love doing things with Dad," says David, including running the Spokane Bloomsday Race. A family tradition since its inception in 1974, three generations of Halls now participate together, though Zack eventually just has to break away to catch the frontrunners.



Don's pride in his alma mater shows wherever he travels. "This university is one of the best schools around as far as Public Health goes," says Don, who keeps up with journals from several schools, including Harvard's school of public health.

A Living Legacy

Now that WellSource “runs itself” as a computer product-based service with thirty-five employees—“2016 was our best year yet”—Don has time to focus on the things that got him excited about wellness in the first place: staying on top of health and wellness research, creating courses that church members can grasp and share, and seeing lives transformed. Trish, who effectively employed walking in her counseling practice, has teamed with Don to train thousands of church members, and the couple are regulars on the camp meeting circuit. Don has published Review & Herald best-sellers like *Preventing Diabetes*, and he’s thinking of taking his book manuscript on blood pressure to a commercial publisher to reach an even wider audience because, for Don, it’s all about the power of public health/wellness to reach the masses.

Indeed, it’s a recent Southern California Conference *Recorder* cover, rather than his *TIME Magazine* photo, that draws the biggest smile of the interview. Don reaches for the latest *Recorder*, the cover of which features a woman wearing a t-shirt that says “Loma Linda Lopers”—a running/walking group Don started forty-one years ago when he was a student. “This is probably the most successful thing I’ve done to change people’s lives,” Don smiles, “because it’s social.”

But Don’s assessment of his achievements may be different in a few years. Between his hobbies of writing, creating new seminars and training presenters, and travel, Don has researched the best ways to make his philanthropy dollars go further. Don’s never lost sight of the impera-

tive to do the most good that he can, so he and Trish are funding the Don and Trish Hall Research Professorship, which oversees the Adventist Health Study that’s expected to shine increasing light on North America’s only Blue Zone, Loma Linda.

Trish shares Don’s enthusiasm for the study that attracted national attention to the Adventist lifestyle when Oprah picked up the *National Geographic* story. “That this professor will be able to convince the rest of the world exactly *how* Mrs. White’s message is right,” she says, is a prospect that really excites them both.

“I think Adventists take for granted the Health message and define it by ‘don’ts’ rather than ‘dos,’” observes David. “Dad is so genuinely excited and passionate about being healthy!”

“My Dad is my hero,” David explains. “He’s humble and gracious, not a self-promoter. But he’s infectiously excited about living healthy.”

“You like your life, even though it ends, to go on and be a blessing,” Don reflects in his soft-spoken, understated way.

And he leaves it at that. ■

Lynn McDowell is Director of Planned Giving/Philanthropy for the Alberta Conference.

Footnotes:

1. *TIME*, January 3, 1983.
2. Don tells more of the story in his own words in a video that can be found at www.llulegacy.org/ps.