

Simmons Lessell, MD

Gaon of Neuro-Ophthalmology

Simmons Lessell, MD elevated the case report to a high art. His descriptions of toxic optic neuropathy, cerebral achromatopsia, palinopsia, indirect optic nerve trauma, and idiopathic pachymeningitis are examples of the most luminous prose in the medical literature. His fellows likened him to a "gaon," a rabbi of exceptional erudition who was often asked to settle difficult issues.

Born in 1933 in Brooklyn, New York, his grandfather was a tailor who had immigrated from Germany and his mother had come from Bessarabia.



Camping at age 8, with sister Florence (left) and a friend, 1941.

Both families were very poor, even in the United States. He grew up in a walk-up behind his father's dental office. He was so skinny as a boy that he was called "Bones".



At his Bar Mitzvah, with mother Augusta (left), father Bernard, and sister Florence, New York, 1946.

After graduating from Amherst College, he attended Cornell Medical College, where he decided to follow in the footsteps of Edward Norton, MD, who taught anatomy of the eye.



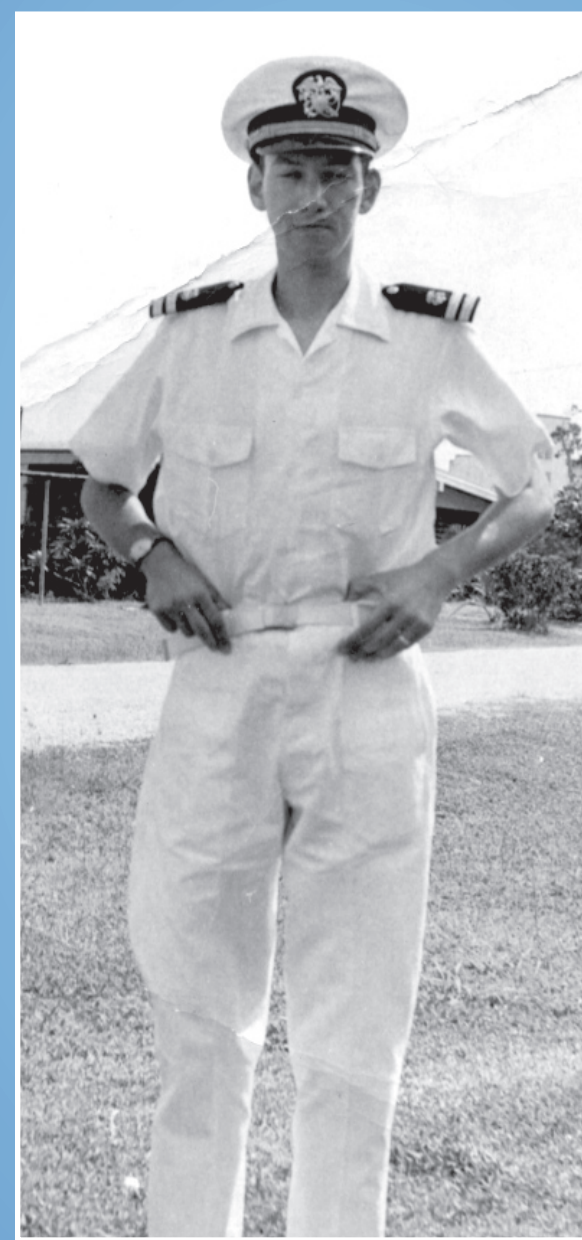
Checking out a new stethoscope as a second year medical student at Cornell Medical College, New York, 1956.

He completed an internship at Bellevue Medical Center in New York City and a year of neurology training at the University of Vermont.



With his wife Irma during his internship at Bellevue Medical Center, New York, 1958.

He spent two years as an officer at the National Institutes of Health Research Center on Guam.



"Bones" in uniform as a senior assistant surgeon, National Institutes of Health Research Station, Guam, 1960.

He returned to a residency at the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary, during which he was trained in neuroophthalmology by David Cogan, MD. He joined the faculty of Boston University in 1971, where he remained for 18 years.



As Professor of Ophthalmology, Neurology, and Anatomy at Boston University, 1971.

In 1989 he moved to Harvard as professor and chief of the neuro-ophthalmology service.



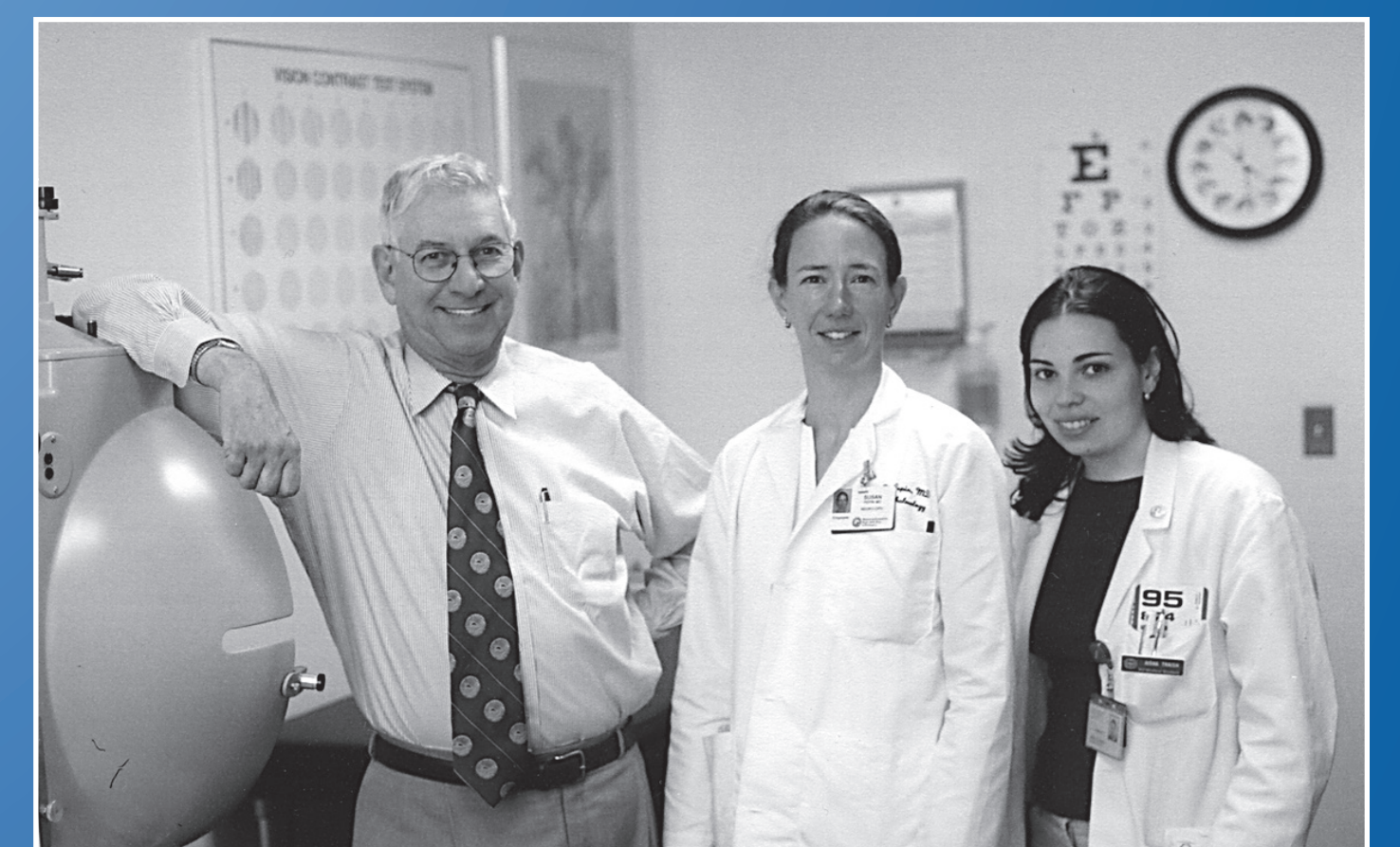
With Nicholas Volpe, MD, Wolfgang Lagrèze, MD, and Dagmar Friedman, MSW, Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary, 1990.

"He found the best things in each of his fellows and made us feel special. He taught me how to write and to love writing." So wrote Nancy Newman, MD, a former fellow.



Fishing on Florida's Lake Okeechobee with Nancy Newman, MD, 1999.

Susan Pepin, MD, a former fellow recalled that "the year I spent with him was the best year of my life."



In his examining room with fellow Susan Pepin, MD and resident Aisha Traish, MD, 2004.

In 2007 he became the Paul Chandler Professor of Ophthalmology at Harvard Medical School. In recognition of his gift as a teacher, his bust is displayed in the auditorium of the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary.



Bust of Lessell sculpted by Ephraim Friedman, MD.



Fly-fishing for striped bass off Plum Island near Boston, 2005.

At the age of 77 he was still examining patients and mentoring medical students.