

Dr. Donald Rasmussen:
Small Town Doctor with a Big Heart
Compiled by Jane M. Martin

*I had the honor of meeting Dr. Donald Rasmussen on my visit to West Virginia. Betty Dotson-Lewis introduced me to her “rural health care saint” and we all spent some time together touring his clinic and chatting in his office. This is just a brief glimpse of the work of Dr. Rasmussen. A thorough history of his work with the coal miners and their fight for better working conditions and compensation can be found in the book, *Appalachia: Spirit Triumphant*. Thanks to Betty Dotson-Lewis for granting permission in the use of the quotes in this piece.*

In 1962 Don Ramussen, a young doctor from Manassa, Colorado, saw an ad in a medical journal: “Doctors Needed in Beckley, West Virginia at the Miners Memorial Hospital.” He says, “I came to look around and never left.”

After serving at Army in bases in Colorado, California, and Texas as well as doing stints in Korea and Viet Nam, working in West Virginia might have been considered unexciting. But with a passion for helping patients Don Rasmussen jumped right in to what would become his life’s mission.

“When I came, I had no knowledge about coal miners’ lung disease, black lung. I began to see a lot of miners who had trouble with their lungs and breathing. Some who complained of shortness of breath had normal breathing tests, but through exercise, we were able to determine a respiratory problem. I persuaded the hospital to get a blood gas analyzer and I guess the first coal miner that we exercised and drew blood from showed the same kind of abnormalities we had seen in unusual lung diseases case in hospitals where I had trained in Denver and San Antonio. I did not come here to do lung disease, but this really got me interested. I was fascinated by these cases.

“After working with this for a while I began to write reports for some miners for social security disability and others who were filing workers compensation claims as a result of respiratory problems. I eventually served as an expert witness before state and federal judges. These cases usually involved the awarding of a miner or his widow; benefits which the coal operator would then try to take away.

“In 1968 I was invited, along with three miners, to testify before the Judicial Subcommittee in Washington, DC. I suppose that was the first time I did any advocacy work, trying to explain to congressmen the problems miners had. Later that year the miners had their annual convention. A talk given there really sparked the beginning of changes in the worker compensation laws.”

Change was on the way.

When asked what motivated Dr. Rasmussen to do the work he did, he said it was based on what he saw – the injustice being done to coal miners. In this present day it’s hard to imagine some of the policies that at that time ruled the coal industry in Appalachia. The good doctor shares some insight and a few stories.

“We knew, based on studies from Britain, we could cut down on lung disease by cutting down on the dust the miners were exposed to. This has been known for hundreds of years. So, repeatedly over the years we have worked to cut down on the dust in the mines.”

But it was an uphill battle – the working man and a handful of dedicated rural doctors up against corporate giants. In light of this, Doctor Rasmussen was stunned by something he heard once about the coal operator controlling the life of the miner and his family, causing them to depend on the coal operator for everything. It was said that in many cases the miners were treated no better than slaves.

“We had a big fight on hand,” he says with no mention of threats he received during union battles.

“One miner was involved in a mining accident. Both his legs were cut off. Back then there was no workmen’s compensation or unemployment and he had to support his family, no matter what. He made a cart with wheels, rolled himself into the mines and continued to shovel coal.

“Another miner had a sister who died. She lived in another town. He needed a cash advance to go to her funeral. In order to provide a cash advance the coal company required the miner to report all his assets, everything he owned. When the coal company officials found out he had a cook stove that was not purchased at the company store, they denied the advance and he was unable to attend the funeral.”

One time Dr. Rasmussen made a long drive and spent a day with about thirty disabled textile workers with brown lung disease. At the end of the day, a leader in the group with tears in her eyes, said, “That’s the first doctor I’ve ever met who told us the truth about why we can’t breathe and helped us figure out what to do about it.” Those workers went on to gain some compensation for their disease because of what Dr. Rasmussen taught them that day.

Here are a few excerpts of accolades provided by distinguished leaders in the fields of business, education, and medicine.

“As a champion for human rights, Dr. Donald Rasmussen helped spearhead the fight waged by the United Mine Workers of America and other advocates to compensate victims of black lung and prevent further victimization. A leading expert on pulmonary disease, he helped change the way the American medical profession views this disease. Through his extensive research on black lung, he was able to dispel the mythology spewed by operator-hired doctors, who often claimed the disease resulted from smoking instead of coal dust. As an outspoken advocate for justice, he played a key role in shaping laws that provide compensation and benefits for black lung victims, including thousands in West Virginia and across America.”

“His work remains an outstanding example of a medical doctor in Appalachia responding to a region-wide crisis, bringing his medical expertise and moral judgment to bear on the problem and then helping ordinary people and their union work solve the problem.”

“Dr. Rasmussen’s expertise on black lung and his willingness to help thousands of victims and their families improved the lives of miners throughout the country. All of us who care about coal miners and the coal mining regions of the United States are forever indebted to him for his service, his humanity and his leadership.”

This humble doctor, however, says it best in describing so simply, what he has found to be his life's work. "I never felt I was leading a charge. I don't see myself as an advocate. I saw the miners who needed help. I just told of my own experiences, from what I learned in working with them in the laboratory. That is part of my normal duty, to take care of my patients in whatever capacity needed. It was all in the scope of my job. I was just a physician performing my duty."



Jane Martin, Dr. Donald Rasmussen, and Betty Lewis in Dr. Rasmussen's office at The Southern West Virginia Clinic