

Cathedral Hill doctor became a leader in the treatment and prevention of AIDS.

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As a boy, James Campbell spent after-school hours in his motherâ??s lab. Ruth Campbell was a doctor, the pathologist for Indianaâ??s South Bend Clinic.

â??She also had a mini lab at home with a microscope, slides, and lots of medical books, which I would pore over,â?• Campbell said. He was a natural to study medicine.

By 1969, he was working in a private internal medicine practice in San Francisco, having earned a degree in chemistry from Yale, a medical degree from the Columbia College of Physicians, and an internship at San Francisco General Hospital.

Within 12 years, he would be treating AIDS patients in San Francisco and become a leader in its treatment and prevention.

Campbell remained on the front lines of the fight against the epidemic for nearly 20 years, pioneering an emphasis on safe sex education and developing guidelines to keep health care workers safe.



James Campbell enjoys playing classical music. (All photos by Colin Campbell)

Now 89 and long retired, heâ??s cultivated a bundle of hobbies and interests. Heâ??s become an inveterate weather watcher, tracking global warming across dozens of states; he plays classical piano, plays bridge, and serves on several committees in the retirement community near Cathedral Hill where he lives.

He looks back on his long medical career with satisfaction. â??If I had to do it all over again, I would still opt for a career in internal medicine,â?• he said.

On the front lines

Campbell began to focus on AIDS in 1981, when he and Dr. Wayne Bayless, whose practice he had joined, started seeing patients with unexplained fever, rash, enlarged lymph nodes, and Kaposiâ??s sarcoma, a rare cancer of the connective tissues. The doctors also encountered patients with pneumocystis pneumonia (PCP), a serious lung infection. Both Campbell and Bayless were gay.

At that time, the combination of symptoms was being referred to as GRID, or Gay Related Immune Deficiency, and no one was certain exactly how it was acquired. But it was spreading rapidly. Its cause was eventually identified as HIV, human immunodeficiency virus.

By 1982, Campbell said, â??I thought it was urgent to publish risk reduction guidelines for safer sex.â?•



James Campbell.

He was the chairman of the scientific affairs committee for the Bay Area Physicians for Human Rights, the worldâ??s first organization of gay physicians, and one of the first to inform people how to engage in safe sex. As a board member of The San Francisco AIDS Foundation, he helped write the original HIV Risk Reduction Guidelines used in hospitals and disseminated at conferences up and down the West Coast.

In addition to promoting safe sex, the guidelines warned nurses to avoid needle sticks and told them how to handle people with pulmonary infections, deal with bodily fluids, and how to safely screen blood. Even then, he said, â??I was fearful these guidelines werenâ??t stringent enoughâ?• to stop the spread of what was becoming known as AIDS, acquired immunodeficiency syndrome.

Even with the guidelines, Campbell was fearful that transmission could occur with â??probably safe sexâ?• encounters. He also feared that those who were HIV positive and seemingly healthy would someday develop AIDS.

Going the extra mile

By 1987, Campbell was seeing very sick AIDS patients and was â??drowning in work.â?• That was a far cry from the practiceâ??s early days, when the city had an excess of doctors, he said, and theyâ??d compete for patients by â??going the extra mile,â?• offering services like house calls and showing up at the emergency room in the middle of the night if patients got sick.

Campbell retired in 1998 at age 62, 11 years after meeting his longtime partner, Tom Alexander, an elementary school principal in San Francisco. â??Thatâ??s when the fun began,â?• he said with a chuckle. Retirement allowed him to finally pursue some of his favorites activities.

Campbell remembered the best part of his relationship with Alexander, who died in 2023, as the road trips they took, some across the country. â??Tom was a superb driver.â?•

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They maintained separate residences â?? â??Tom in Mill Valley and me in my home in the city until we both wound up living at The Sequoias, still in separate apartments.â?•



James Campbell, a book lover, has an extensive home library.

His apartment reflects his passions. Thereâ??s a baby grand piano and a wall of packed floor-to-ceiling bookcases. In high school, he was a member of the 6,000-volume library club. â??I was in charge of keeping the shelves in order, which I thought was just wonderful to be oriented to so many books,â?• he said.

Campbell has lived at the continuing care retirement community near Cathedral Hill since 2020. He serves on the facilityâ??s Health Service Liaison Committee. When he was chair, from 2021 to 2023, he said, â??COVID-19 was usually the main item on the agenda.â?• He sits on another committee dealing with end-of-life issues.

He was born and raised in South Bend, Indiana, where his father, Marvin, owned a paper box manufacturing business founded by his own father in 1893. Campbell had an older sister who died at 48 from melanoma. Heâ??s still in contact with her three children, who have children of their own.

Overcoming a disability

From his teenage years, he suffered from lumbar spinal stenosis, which affected his flexibility and ability to stand for extended periods. â??In medical school, my weight dropped from 163 to 147 pounds just from standing in surgeries and rounds,â?• he said. Nonetheless, he later became an avid skier.

Now, 89, Campbell displays a joie de vivre. Tall and slender, he exudes a kindness that likely served him well as a doctor. His practice was built by people â??shopping aroundâ?• for doctors and deciding to stay. â??I liked medicine because of the problem-solving, but also because of having long-term relationships with my patients,â?• he said.

.In 1962, Campbell was drafted into the U.S. Army Medical Corps. He served for more than a year as a captain in the First Cavalry Division in Korea. It was 10 years after the Korean War armistice, he said, â??when life was so boring there, time seemed to stand still.â?• To quell the boredom, Campbell learned to play bridge with the artillery officers, which became â??one of my favorite pastimes.â?• He now plays once a week at The Sequoias.

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He returned to Fort Hamilton in Brooklyn, where he finished his two-year enlistment. In 1965, he went to the University of California, San Francisco, to complete his three-year residency in medicine. He rotated between San Francisco General and UC-Moffitt Hospital, where he completed a one-year fellowship in endocrinology and psychosomatic medicine.

Finished with his studies, in 1969, he joined Baylessâ??s practice.

He and Alexander met at the Calvary Church, where they both sang in the choir. Campbell now sings with the Sequoia Voices, which performs for residents about three times a year.



James Campbell, left, performing in a barbershop quartet with James Thomassen, Greg Goyhenetche, and Tom Carter, (Photo courtesy of James Campbell)

He took singing lessons to boost his confidence, then in the late â??90s sang in the chorus at City College of San Francisco and with barbershop quartets. â??I liked singing in a barbershop quartet so much, I joined the San Francisco Cable Car Chorus in 2010,â?• he said.

He sang and performed with the Cable Car Chorus until it became difficult to stand for long periods and too tiring to perform at night.

In 1978, he â??got seriousâ?• about the piano and started taking lessons. His tastes lean toward classical compositions. Brahms, Chopin, and Debussy are among his favorites, â??with the occasional Scott Joplin, the most unclassical I would do.â?•

Campbell and other piano players started a monthly performance group just for themselves, which plays on the Steinway B seven-foot piano in The Sequoias auditorium. He also works out daily in the gym and takes long walks in the neighborhood.

â??My philosophy of life is I accept the limitations I have now, but any condition I have is open for improvement,â?• he said.

Tracking global warming

Aside from all these activities is his lifelong interest in the weather. He started noticing the weather at 15 in South Bend, â??where there were four distinct seasons which tended to be whimsical,â?• he said. â??In March, there were frequent snow blizzards in some years and long stretches of spring weather in others.â?•

His interest waned until he began skiing in earnest in 1968. â??By the mid-80s, I noticed a deterioration of ski conditions in California due to warmer temperatures,â?• he said.



James Campbell occasionally plays Scott Joplin tunes.

Climatologists started to talk of global warming in the 1990s, but Donald Trump declared that the warming theory was a hoax in 2016. â??That falsehood inspired me to do my climate study comparing the 20th Century to the 21st,â?• Campbell said.

Heâ??s conducted climate studies of 24 cities across the U.S., comparing temperatures from 1901 to 1990 and then from 1991 to the present.

Campbell has more than enough to keep him busy. But weâ??ll always have weather, so Campbell will always have that to study.

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Date Created
13/10/2025
Author
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