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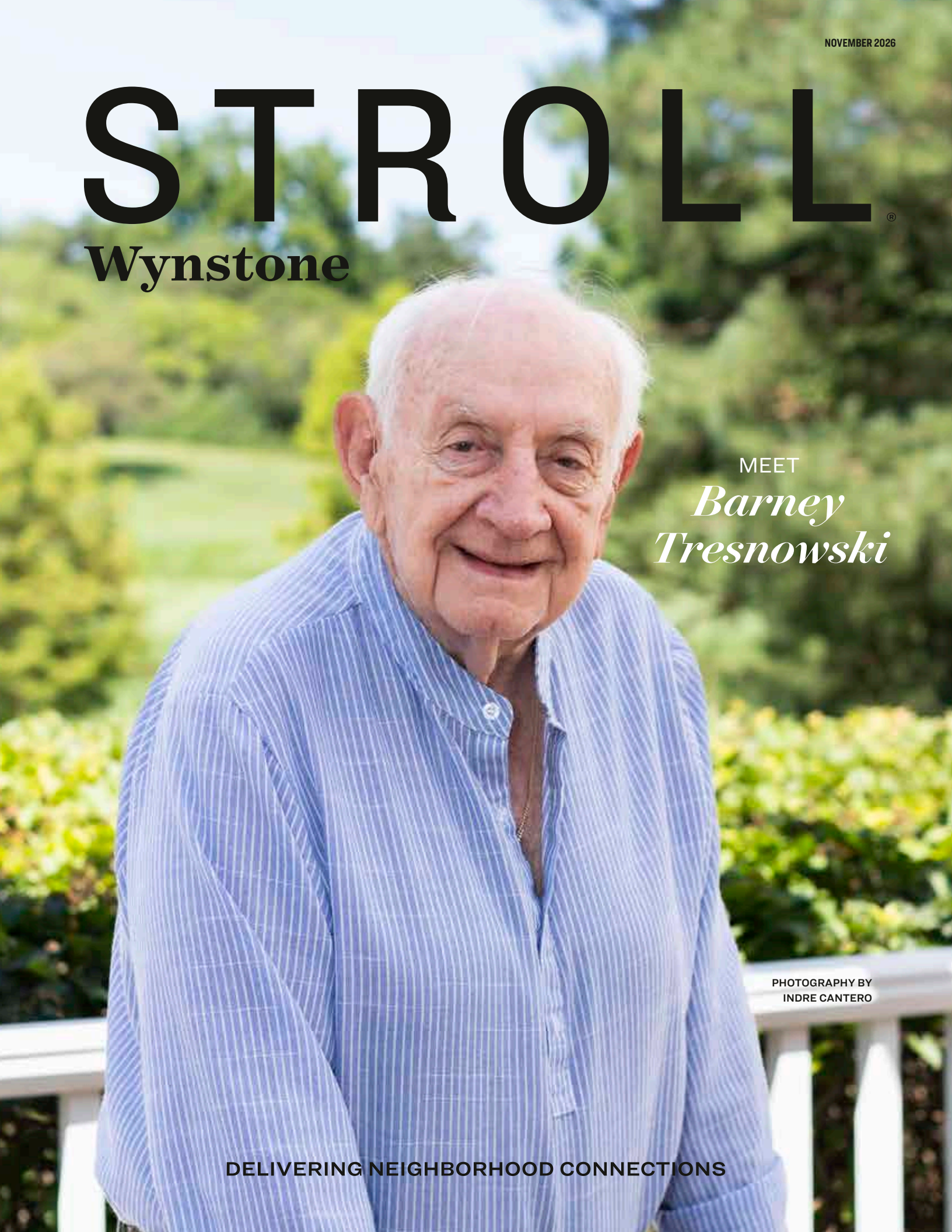

MEET

Barney Tresnowski

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DELIVERING NEIGHBORHOOD CONNECTIONS

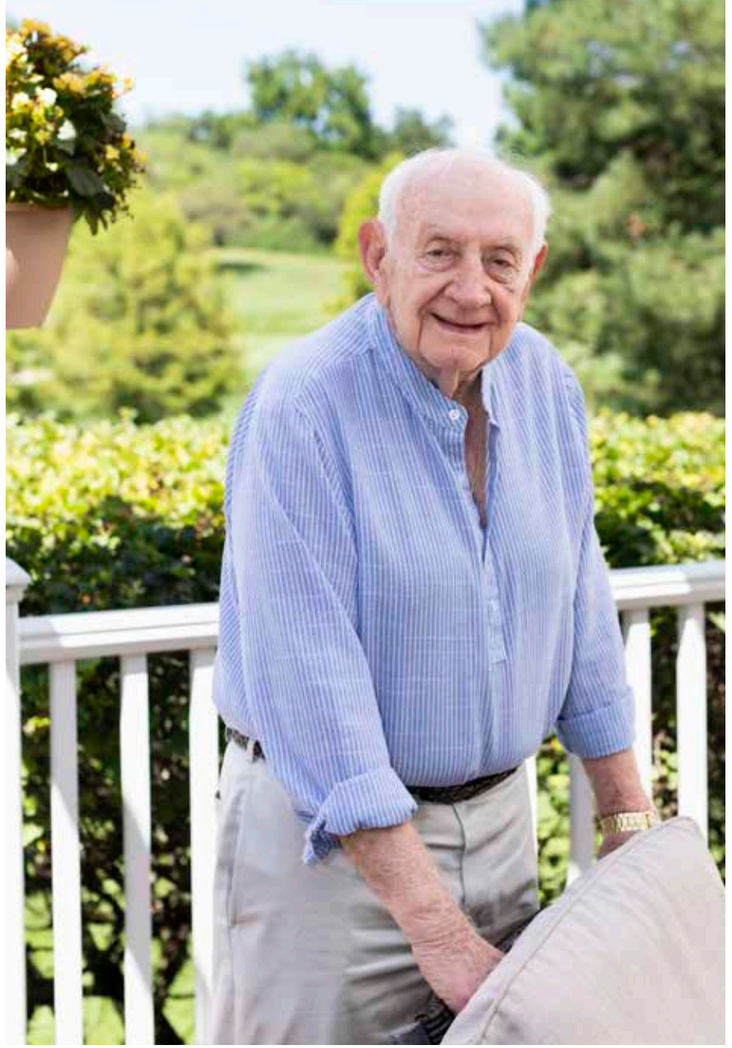
The Quiet Measure of a Life

Barney Tresnowski helped build the machinery of modern health care, then went to law school in his sixties to represent families who could not afford counsel. At ninety-three, he measures his life by something quieter.

BY MADELINE F. KELLEHER
PHOTOS BY INDRE CANTERO PHOTOGRAPHY



Madeline and Barney



"ARE YOU READY TO DIE AT 29?"

The Question Stopped Barney Tresnowski Cold.

It was 1967, at a hospital conference in Chicago, Illinois. Barney

Tresnowski had run into Walt McNerney, an old acquaintance from the University of Michigan, who had just taken charge of the Blue Cross Association. Medicare was new, and the country needed an administrative system capable of making the program work. The Blue Cross Association had been selected for the job, and McNerney wanted Tresnowski to run it.

Tresnowski's first answer was no. He had a young family and secure job running a hospital he just helped rebuild outside Detroit, Michigan. He knew hospitals; he did not know insurance. Trading stability for a national undertaking whose lines were still being drawn hardly seemed prudent.

Then McNerney asked his age. "Twenty-nine," Tresnowski told him. McNerney pressed: "Are you ready to die at 29?"

By the next day, Tresnowski had made his decision. He would pack up his family and move to Arlington Heights, Illinois.

Nearly six decades later, the question still frames his story. Tresnowski would spend 28 years at the Blue Cross Association, rise to President and Chief Executive Officer, appear before Congress more than 100 times and help lead an organization that, at its peak, covered nearly half of insured Americans. Then, in his sixties, he would begin again; this time in law school, on his way to a decade of unpaid family law work for people who could not afford an attorney.

Today, many Wynstone neighbors know him simply as Barney: the courteous gentleman out for his morning walk, or the devoted reader settled on his porch. He does not volunteer the rest. But behind that quiet presence is a life repeatedly enlarged by one decision: when invited to serve, he stepped forward.

THE BOY WHO NOTICED

Born Bernard Tresnowski at Billings Hospital in Chicago in 1932, he grew up across the state line in East Chicago, Indiana, during the Depression. His father was a police officer who rose to chief of detectives. His mother worked as a secretary at a plumbing supply company, where the two had met. Money was scarce enough that relatives on both sides of the family moved in with them for a time.

A nun at his Catholic grade school gave him the name the rest of the world would use. With another Bernard already in the class, she began calling him Barney. From then on, only his mother—and, later, his wife—called him Bernard.

As a teenager, he washed walls and scrubbed floors at a local hospital. The work had no glamour, but the place held his attention. This was before antibiotics transformed medicine, and he watched an entire institution organize itself around the care of people who were sick. Something about that collective purpose stayed with him.

Football opened the next door. A scholarship took him to the University of Michigan, where, he says, he finally learned how to study and how to think. Michigan had no health-policy program, so a professor helped him assemble one, blending medical science and business. The improvised course of study became a blueprint for his career and the beginning of a family tradition: children and grandchildren followed him to Michigan, until, as he tells it, nearly everyone became a Wolverine except the Notre Dame holdouts.

LEARNING EVERY JOB IN THE ROOM

His route to Blue Cross first passed through Albert Einstein Medical Center

in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. There, a supervisor made certain the young administrator scrubbed in for surgeries and shadowed physicians instead of learning health care from behind a desk.

Later came a 400-hundred-bed hospital in Pontiac, Michigan, that was in serious trouble. Tresnowski reorganized the medical staff structure, overhauled employee benefits, resolved outstanding bills so the hospital could meet payroll, and led a campaign to fund a new building. By the time McNerney approached him in Atlantic City, Tresnowski had already learned his defining professional habit: solve the problem from within.

At the Blue Cross Association, that instinct scaled nationally. Tresnowski served in several roles before becoming President and CEO, a position he held for fifteen years. During his 28-year tenure, the association consolidated more than 100 separate Blue Cross plans into roughly 60 and strengthened standards across the system, a significant undertaking. When national health-reform debate grew adversarial in the 1990s, he appeared on *60 Minutes* to defend the organization rather than allow others to define it. His own record came under intense scrutiny during the conflict, but investigators found no wrongdoing.

Tresnowski's Blue Cross years also left a mark on federal law that outlasted his time in the role. In 1991, at the request of newly appointed HHS Secretary Louis W. Sullivan, he joined Travelers Insurance executive Joseph Brophy to lead the Workgroup for Electronic Data Interchange, a public and private effort to standardize how the health care industry shared information electronically. The initiative stalled before it reached Congress, but the group's recommendations became the foundation for the administrative simplification rules later folded into the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, the law known today simply as HIPAA.

> Roll up your sleeves and get into the organization. Know everybody's job. Don't do their job, but understand what's going on. And don't gossip. It's the worst thing in the world.

Tresnowski believed no President or CEO of a company should remain in the role for more than a decade: three years to learn the job, three to perform it well, and then, as he puts it, people begin "nipping at your heels." When the decade was up, the board asked him to stay through the health-reform battle. He agreed to three more years; those three became five. He later described that final stretch as some of the hardest of his career.

His leadership advice has none of the varnish of a business-school slogan:

"Roll up your sleeves and get into the organization. Know everybody's job. Don't do their job, but understand what's going on. And don't gossip. It's the worst thing in the world."

Knowledge, he believes, begins with the willingness to admit what you do not know. He still names the mentors who made that admission safe for him decades ago. Whether the work is medicine, law, or managing a household, he says, honesty about the limits of your understanding is how learning starts.



BEGINNING AGAIN

Retirement could have been an ending. Tresnowski treated it as an opening.

In his early sixties, after leading one of the nation's most consequential health care organizations, he enrolled in law school. The ambition was not new; as a young man, he had wanted to study law but lacked the means. Nor was he collecting a credential. He had a precise second act in mind: public-interest law for people who otherwise would face the legal system alone.

A friend connected him with what was then the Legal Assistance Society, now Legal Aid. For the next ten years, Tresnowski handled family law matters without pay. He describes the work as some of the most meaningful work of his life—not because it was easy, but because it placed him "down in the trenches" beside a client, working out what had to happen next. Legal Aid recently honored him with a Champion of Justice award before an audience of hundreds. He mentions the recognition only when asked.

He is matter-of-fact about why representation matters. A courtroom can be bewildering to someone standing alone; the judge controls the room, and a case turns on what can be proved. Most people without training cannot assemble that proof by themselves. They need someone beside them who can.

SIX RED ROSES

Ask Tresnowski what makes him proudest and the national title disappears. He does not say Blue Cross. He does not say Congress, law school or the award. He says his family.

He and his first wife had six children. Her last words to him were about their youngest son, Dave, who was still young and would need the support of his family. Take care of Dave, she told him.

Dave grew up to become an Emmy-winning photojournalist. Every Mother's Day, Tresnowski takes six red roses to his late wife's grave, one for each child. This year, Dave went with him. Standing there, Tresnowski told his wife how well their youngest had turned out. When he looked up, Dave was crying. So, Tresnowski admits, was he.

The book that has shaped him most is not a management manual or legal text, but Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*. Tresnowski distills its lessons into three obligations: do work that serves the common good and do it with kindness; build real relationships with people who challenge and sustain you; and when you encounter suffering, pay attention and act.

The pattern is visible from the hospital floors he scrubbed as a teenager to the families he represented for free decades later. Achievement matters in his telling only when it bends toward someone else.

THE LIFE BEHIND AN ORDINARY TUESDAY

Asked how he hopes to be remembered, Tresnowski answers without ceremony: *"A man of faith. Lots of setbacks, but it was his faith that saved him."*

Then, characteristically, he turns the conversation toward someone else.

At Wynstone, he would be more likely to ask about your grandchildren, your golf game, or what you have been reading than to recount his own resume. He still spends roughly an hour and a half most mornings with moral and political philosophy. His home is orderly, every object in its place. The discipline of a life spent leading institutions has become the texture of an ordinary Tuesday.

The great turns in Tresnowski's life did not arrive as a master plan. They came as invitations: leave the safe job; lead the national organization; enter law school; stand beside a stranger in court. Each asked him to become a beginner again. Each time, after measuring the risk against the chance to be useful, he said yes.

So when neighbors see the ninety-three-year-old gentleman on his morning walk, they are seeing more than a distinguished career in response. They are seeing the boy who noticed what care looked like, the executive who learned every job in the room, the new lawyer who went back into the trenches—and a husband carrying six red roses.

That may be the truest measure of his quiet life.

