"**P**resident Roosevelt, shortly after his inauguration, calling on Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes at age 92, found him reading Plato. When Roosevelt asked him why, Holmes replied, 'To improve my mind.' This, coming from perhaps the most venerated member of the Supreme Court. He still wanted to improve his mind."

Warren Von Ehren
President-Emeritus
Wisconsin Hospital Association

Oliver Wendell Holmes once said that retirement reminded him of a horse race," says Warren R. Von Ehren, an admirer of the great lawmaker and poet. "He said, 'Horses don't stop at the finish line; they canter for awhile.' That's what I'd like to do—canter for awhile."

Warren Von Ehren has retired. After 26 years as the Wisconsin Hospital Association's executive director and president, he doesn't want to rust out; he'd prefer to wear out.

Maybe he'll work with the University of Wisconsin's faculty in some capacity to put to use the master's degree he earned in hospital administration from Northwestern University. Maybe he'll become involved with young people.

But whatever he does, he never wants to lose his youthful enthusiasm.

"Once that's gone, you start to deteriorate, both mentally and physically, whether you're 40 or 80," he says. "I have always plunged ahead, and I've enjoyed what I've been doing all my life."

Mix youthful enthusiasm with passion, perspective and the presence to accept advice, and you have Warren's philosophy on life. How did he acquire it?

His career in hospital administration began in the United States Army, whose ranks he joined shortly after earning a bachelor of science degree at Northwestern University in 1942.

"I had been a graduate student at the University of Illinois–Urbana, planning on earning my doctorate in biology and going into teaching and research," he explains. "With experience in biology, joining the 13th General Hospital and doing lab work seemed a natural thing."

After that, he was selected to attend Officer Candidate School at Camp Barkley, Texas. He graduated from OCS in June, 1943, was commissioned second lieutenant and was assigned to the 98th General Hospital in Fort Jackson, South Carolina. Thereafter, he spent 22 months in England, France and Germany.

"The Army introduced me to the whole idea of hospitals and health care," he comments. "It changed my whole direction."

Upon returning to the States, Von Ehren acquired an appointment to teach freshman biology at Northwestern University in September, 1946. That summer, he began his first job with the Veterans Administration Hospital in Hines, Illinois. And there he met his first mentor, Dr. Edward Leveroos, a flight surgeon from Superior, Wisconsin and the hospital's medical director.

"We became very good friends," says Von Ehren. "He's the first person who really asked me, 'What are you going to do with your life?' I told him I wanted to earn my doctorate and then teach. He advised me, instead, to stay in the hospital field, since it was the up-and-coming thing. But I had to make my own decision."

As a result, Von Ehren left the VA hospital, taught biology for the semester, and quickly decided that teaching wasn't his calling. Hospital administration held a greater interest, so he enrolled full-time at Northwestern in the masters program.

While at Northwestern, he also worked for the American Hospital Association in Chicago. After graduation, he served as assistant administrator at Bronson Methodist Hospital in Kalamazoo, Michigan, from 1949 to 1951. His boss, William Perdew, was a Methodist minister who served as the hospital's administrator.

"Perdew had no business background," he says, "but he was superb. He knew how to handle people, to get them to work together, to realize their full potential as human beings. He was my first true example of what a hospital administrator should be."

Von Ehren had great admiration for Perdew, who, though a perfectionist, wasn't the kind of person to look over one's shoulder.

"He made suggestions, but left it up to the individual to work it out," says Von Ehren. "He always followed up and pointed out what you had done wrong, but never vindictively. He was critical, but in a constructive way."

In 1951, Von Ehren became administrative assistant for the AMA's Council on Medical Education and Hospitals. He worked there until 1953 when he moved to Green Bay, Wisconsin, where he was Bellin Memorial Hospital's administrator for seven years.

"It was the first time I was really on my own," he says. "Now that I think about it, it was presumptuous to think I could run a hospital at age 32."

When he arrived at Bellin, the budget was $500,000 to $600,000 annually; when he left in 1960, it was in the millions.

"At Bellin, I learned that the 'Buck Stops Here,'" he says. "The real art of administration, I found, is getting people to work together. You must select the right people and allow them to work on their own—within the parameters you set. You must give them the freedom to make their own mistakes, but to learn from them as well."

During his tenure at Bellin, a building program added 75 beds and provided new ancillary services. In 1955, under his leadership, a three-year diploma school of nursing was established.

"I was too young to really stop and reflect on the responsibility," recalls Von Ehren. "If I had, I might've gotten cold feet. I had that youthful enthusiasm—which is great, and there ought to be more of it; I really plunged ahead."

Plunging ahead is a way of life to Warren Von Ehren and with all his experiences—the Army, various hospitals and career decisions—he has developed a philosophy that reflects it.

"If I were on a desert island and had a choice of two books to take with me, I would choose the Bible and the collected works of Shakespeare," he reflects. "The Bible—even non-religiously speaking—is a guide to life. It's a differentiation between right and wrong; it's the responsibility of human beings. The whole distillation of life is contained in those two writings, no matter who wrote them."

One specific piece of Biblical wisdom Von Ehren admires is found in 2nd Timothy: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

"Each person must do the best he or she can," says Von Ehren, though he doesn't claim to be a Biblical scholar. "I believe I have fought a good fight through my life—I have enjoyed what I've done. I've set things out for myself and I have kept the faith."

He also feels we should be our brother's keeper.

"Some people can't take care of themselves, concerning health care, food—anything," he says. "I feel it's the responsibility of a civilized society to care for these people."

Though a strong advocate of striving to do your best, he recognizes that large scale changes are not always within reach.

"There are people who have had big influences," he points out. "Robert E. Lee led the Confederacy; Lincoln preserved the Union; FDR got us out of the depression; and Reagan, I feel, has instilled more self-respect within the American people.

"None of us probably will ever achieve gigantic reforms. But we can do little things, like serve as mentor for someone. That's not a big thing, but it offers the opportunity to touch someone personally."

While Von Ehren has developed a unique philosophy of his own, he also holds Abraham Lincoln's in high esteem.

"Lincoln set goals for himself," says Von Ehren. "His whole direction was to preserve the Union, and I have the utmost admiration for that.

"Lincoln became the champion of the downtrodden, the disadvantaged. He was a very moral person, interested in seeing that the 'right' thing was done. He fought a good fight, finished the course he set out for himself, and he kept the faith."

Warren Von Ehren has, likewise, finished one course he set out for himself. But there are other courses to pursue, following retirement.

He and his wife, Mary, will continue to enjoy spending time with their children, Penny and Daniel. Penny and her husband, Mike Isermann, live in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Daniel and his wife, Rehka, live in Marlboro, Massachusetts.

"After 43 years, I'm not ready for the rocking chair," he concludes. "It was time for me to get out of WHA. They need someone with fresh ideas, with a fresh perspective, who can do things that need to be done.

"What am I going to do now? I would like to have some identification with something, some purpose—perhaps writing, teaching or volunteering. The key is to really live, no matter what you do. I hope I can find that key."

In **Hamlet,** *Laertes said to Polonius:*

This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man."

We must be true to ourselves. If we can't be honest with ourselves, who can we be honest with?

Warren Von Ehren

WHA Chairmen
Who Served With
Warren Von Ehren

1960
Monsignor Edmund Goebel
Archdiocese of Milwaukee

1961
Nels Hanshus
Luther Hospital, Eau Claire

1962
Martin Albrecht
University Hospitals, Madison

1963
Harold Guntner
Memorial Hospital, Menomonie

1964
Robert Jones
Waukesha Memorial Hospital

1965
Sr. Mary Josephine, D.C.
St. Mary's Hospital, Milwaukee

1966-67
Glen Maher
Grandview Hospital, LaCrosse

1968
Edward Logan
Milwaukee Children's Hospital

1969
Gordon Johnsen
Madison General Hospital

1970
Eugene Arnett
Memorial Hospital of Taylor Co., Medford

1971
T. E. Besser
Hudson Memorial Hospital

1972
Dean Roe
Lutheran Hospital of Milwaukee, Inc.

1973
Kenneth Van Bree
Divine Savior Hospital & Nursing Home,
Inc., Portage

1974
Sr. Mary Gregory Hanson
St. Francis Hospital, LaCrosse

1975
John Shepard
Appleton Memorial Hospital

1976
William Johnson, Jr.
Methodist Hospital, Madison

1977-78
David Jaye, Jr.
St. Joseph's Hospital, Marshfield

1978-79
Leo Bargielski
Watertown Memorial Hospital

1980
Ronald Labott
West Allis Memorial Hospital

1981
Donald Orleans
Holy Family Hospital, Manitowoc

1982
Lowell Miller
Memorial Medical Center, Ashland

1983
Robert Drisner
Community Memorial Hospital,
Menomonee Falls

1984
Matthew Hubler
Sacred Heart Hospital, Eau Claire

1985
James Sexton
St. Agnes Hospital, Fond du Lac

1986
Joseph Neidenbach
St. Vincent Hospital, Green Bay