



## Richard Kenneth Willms

May 22, 1930 - April 26, 2026

Richard Kenneth ("Dick") Willms, 95, of Tyler, TX died peacefully on April 26, 2026. He was born May 22, 1930 to Florence (Peters) and John C. Willms in Lake Forest, IL, growing up in Lake Bluff, IL. Known in his youth as Rich or Richie, he was the third of six children.

Dick liked to share that he held his first job at age 6, with a friend raising chickens in the friend's basement. He held multiple jobs after that and was active in school. He was a Golden Gloves boxer in grade school, played American Legion baseball in junior high, and in high school, played football and semiprofessional baseball. He continued to play football and baseball through his college years. All left-handed!

Dick attended Lake Forest College where he graduated magna cum laude with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1952. He then attended University of Illinois (Chicago) College of Medicine where he met the love of his life, Wilda (Foushee) Willms. They married in 1956 (his graduation year) and enjoyed 68 years of marriage.

Knowing he wanted to become a physician and graduating high school during draft time, Dick was selected to be part of the Berry Plan, allowing him to defer his military service until after graduation from medical school. He then served in the United States Air Force, becoming a Flight Surgeon and rising to the level of Captain before he was honorably discharged in 1972, after serving for years in the reserves.

Some of Dick's proudest accomplishments were his residency training in

Houston at Baylor College of Medicine from 1960-1965 under Michael DeBakey, M.D. as part of the "zoo" and his fellowship at the Texas Heart Institute in 1965 under Denton Cooley, M.D. His children and grandchildren heard countless stories of his time in training, especially when Dr. DeBakey said "Dick, you did a good job." If you know, you know.

As Dick's training was coming to an end, he and Wilda thought about where they wanted to raise their family, with the desire to live in a smaller town with warm weather and outdoor activities. They discovered Jacksonville, TX where Dick began his career in 1965 as a Vascular, Thoracic, and General Surgeon, earning Board Certifications in both General and Thoracic Surgery. The family moved to Tyler, TX in 1977 and for many years, Dick and Wilda worked together with Wilda serving as office manager in Dick's surgical practice. During his tenure, Dick served as chief of the department of surgery and as chief of staff of East Texas Medical Center and Mother Frances Hospital. He (reluctantly) retired after 63 years of practice but had steady hands until the end.

Dick loved his family but he was passionate about his patients and the practice of medicine. He devoted his life to the thousands of patients he treated and cared for and he lived by the Hippocratic Oath and the motto of "patients first." He embraced the principle that patient welfare is of the highest priority and that patients and their loved ones are human beings. He received numerous thank you notes from patients and their families, and he kept all of them. He also received countless notes from fellow physicians thanking him not only for his friendship but also for his wisdom, guidance, and compassionate care of patients, while describing him as an incredible role model, a gentleman, and a patient teacher. He never shied away from making his opinions known to his colleagues or hospital administration about his view on the best way to be a physician.

In 1996, he was awarded the prestigious Gold-Headed Cane Award by the Smith County Medical Association, the highest honor bestowed by fellow physicians, symbolizing the highest qualities of excellence, service, and

selflessness that a physician can contribute to his community, family, and the art and science of medicine. He was a proud member of the Smith County Medical Society, Texas Medical Association, American College of Surgeons, Texas Surgical Society, and the American Medical Association.

Dick and Wilda created many wonderful and memorable experiences for their children, grandchildren, extended family, and friends, many of those around water sports and fish fries at Lake Jacksonville, TX. Seeing the benefits of physicians having one-on-one time with their children, for 17 years, they organized, orchestrated, and hosted a spring campout at the lake for Tyler-area physicians and their children to nurture family bonds. Dick loved to work in his vegetable garden, tend to his beautiful roses, and take care of things around the house. He enjoyed being at home and watching their peacocks, deer, birds, and other wildlife. He was a lifelong learner and the importance of and gift of education was passed to his children.

Dick's children and grandchildren are grateful for the years they had with him and are thankful that he is at peace. He was preceded in death by his wife Wilda and their son Michael Shane Willms. He is survived by three children: Richard Scott Willms and wife Susan Watkins; Christopher Denton Willms and wife Ann Willms; and Melissa Jane Willms and husband Mickey Davis; as well as grandchildren Benjamin, Joshua, Molly, Nina, and Olivia.

The family will hold a private funeral service. For those who want honor him, Dick loved nature. He also said he could never have had his career without the support of Lake Forest College. In his honor, please feel free to contribute to Texas Parks & Wildlife or an animal welfare charity, Lake Forest College in Lake Forest, IL, or another charity of your choice.