

## Dr. J. William Charboneau took an atypical route to pioneering radiologist

CHICAGO — For [J. William Charboneau, M.D.](#), or Bill to his friends, life is a journey of unknown possibilities, filled with family. And family isn't just genetics. It's the people who occupy your life, who flesh out your story — or your piece of a bigger story.

Dr. Charboneau, an emeritus professor of radiology at Mayo Clinic, on Tuesday, Nov. 28, received the 2017 Gold Medal from the Radiological Society of North America at its 103rd Scientific Assembly and Annual Meeting in Chicago, and in so doing thanked those family members — his wife, colleagues, friends, protégés and mentors.

The Radiological Society of North America Board of Directors determines Gold Medal winners, who must receive a unanimous vote. Considered the Radiological Society of North America's highest honor, the medal is given to “those persons who, in the judgment of the board, have rendered unusual service to the science of radiology.”

Dr. Charboneau says he is especially humbled to receive the award and grateful to Mayo Clinic, as well as his peers and colleagues, because he almost didn't find the door that led him down this path.

He grew up in a small town — Lancaster, Wisconsin — with a population of about 4,000 people. And, though he had no interest in going to college, he didn't yet know what he *did* want to do. His sister, who is eight years older, loved her job as a laboratory technician and recommended that he go to an X-ray technology school.

And, so, shown a door, he opened it and walked through, enrolling in a 24-month X-ray technology program in Rockford, Illinois. And what he saw on the other side of that door forever changed the direction his life would take.

“My route to get to where I am is not the typical route. ... That was the first time I had ever been in a hospital,” Dr. Charboneau says. “When I got in there, I thought, ‘Wow, medicine is amazing! And look at what these people are doing.’ Suddenly, lightbulbs started going on, and I thought this would be cool to do in another way.”

Within a month of his arrival, he knew that he wanted to pursue medicine as a career and started thinking about medical school. A neurosurgeon at that hospital in Rockford saw his interest, recognized the potential and encouraged Dr. Charboneau to finish the program and go to medical school.

Two years older than most of his freshman peers, Dr. Charboneau landed at the University of Wisconsin. The age gap was an advantage, and, coupled with the drive to get into medical school, he spent his time — nights and weekends included — studying in the library. And that was no simple undertaking, as he didn't know how to study to achieve grades that would allow him to be accepted into medical school. He learned this on the fly.

“My route into medicine is not like a number of kids who are just innately bright, who say, ‘I think I'll go into medicine,’ and they do and they get in. Mine was more of a journey to figure it out,” he says.

He graduated, went to medical school at the University of Wisconsin and had every intention of continuing his education in Madison, Wisconsin, save for one chance encounter. Here again, family showed him a door.

Dr. Charboneau wanted to pursue his residency at the University of Wisconsin. A friend, a radiologist at Wisconsin, told him to go see Mayo Clinic. After resistance, Dr. Charboneau finally agreed.

As it turned out, Mayo Clinic was just what he needed, and so he went — with grand plans to go back to Madison when he was done. But then he realized that Mayo wasn't just a fit for his residency, but for everything that would follow. And he never left.

"Throughout my career, while there were always other opportunities to leave, being part of the Mayo team — the Mayo family — was a 9 out of 10," he says.

And, so, from 1976 through 2010, Dr. Charboneau spent his career at Mayo Clinic's Rochester campus. And even in retirement, he says he cherishes the opportunity to stay connected and see his successors continue the legacy that began well before 1976.

"Mayo is so unique in so many ways, and I came to realize it in maybe five to 10 years into my career," he says. "In my interactions with others, I came to understand that Mayo is a big rocket ship. And then I realized, 'Oh, my gosh, I am riding a rocket with this booster on my back of the legacy of people who preceded me.' And it's that legacy that took my career forward in a huge way."

And, Dr. Charboneau says, his journey on the rocket ship Mayo took him to places and introduced him to people all around the world he never could have imagined as an aimless high school student in search of that unknown.

"Thank you to my colleagues," he adds. "I've been so fortunate to have such good friends and colleagues over the years. I literally could not wait to come in each day with each of them, and I thank them for being such terrific co-workers and colleagues. ... We radiologists value the friendship and collegiality at great meetings like this one. We value the sharing of ideas and the learning from one another that occurs at this meeting."

"To the young people in the audience, I would love to be in your shoes right now. Because the opportunities you have in imaging and image-guided intervention are incredible, and I know you are going to find this a wonderfully dynamic and engaging medical specialty, and you definitely made the right choice in picking radiology. I would pick it again in a heartbeat."

###

### **About Mayo Clinic**

Mayo Clinic is a nonprofit organization committed to clinical practice, education and research, providing expert, whole-person care to everyone who needs healing. For more information, visit [mayoclinic.org/about-mayo-clinic](https://www.mayoclinic.org/about-mayo-clinic) or [newsnetwork.mayoclinic.org](https://www.newsnetwork.mayoclinic.org).