Dr. Richard Rockefeller  

On June 13, 2014, at the age of 65, Dr. Richard Rockefeller passed away while piloting a small plane that crashed in Westchester County, NY.

Richard was a generous man concerned with improving the world. “Mr. Rockefeller was what is commonly called a Renaissance man, a Harvard-trained family doctor who could, among other enthusiasms, play the bagpipe, take polished photographs, carve wood, and ski, hike and sail expertly. But he devoted himself to a half-dozen causes, among them healing the wounds of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), curing sleeping sickness in Africa and saving the seas,” wrote Joseph Berger of The New York Times (June 23, 2014).

Richard worked closely with MAPS Executive Director Rick Doblin, Ph.D., over the past three and half years to further our efforts to develop MDMA-assisted psychotherapy into an FDA-approved prescription treatment for PTSD. “Richard and I became a well-matched team and were building a strong friendship,” said Doblin. “My email account says we exchanged 2,379 messages. His passion for exploring the potential of MDMA-assisted psychotherapy to heal PTSD matched my own. He realized that new approaches to treating PTSD were needed to avoid ongoing cycles of multigenerational traumatization, and that human suffering cuts across artificial boundaries of nationality, race, religion, and class.”

Richard wasn’t put off by the fact that making MDMA into a medicine is a long, uphill battle. Paradoxically, it may have been part of the appeal—along with the way having these tools available to physicians might have given his chosen profession something he felt it lacked. Coming to terms with his unique family history, being a fourth-generation Rockefeller, Richard was willing to utilize what he called “his name” and his most precious possession, his time. Richard’s moving speech at the San Francisco Commonwealth Club (December 9, 2013) about the use of MDMA-assisted psychotherapy to treat PTSD was just one example of his willingness to lend his time and reputation toward this cause.

During his talk at the Commonwealth Club, Richard gave the audience some insight into his motivations. “One of the reasons I care so much is because I am hopeful. With major policy changes affecting availability of AIDS treatment and the eradication of smallpox we have seen that something of enormous danger to the world can be changed very quickly,” he explained. “In the year 2000, I was diagnosed with a form of leukemia that had no effective treatment. It happened that the most effective drug ever produced for cancer became available within six months of my diagnosis. My life would not have been saved without accelerated approval of that drug. My work here is paying forward my gratitude.”

Richard was the person most responsible for moving the Department of Defense (DoD) and the Department of Veteran’s Affairs (VA) from resistance to collaboration in the effort to explore MDMA's potential as an adjunct to psychotherapy for PTSD. Richard’s fundamental accomplishment has profound consequences that will bear much fruit over the coming years. DoD and VA involvement in MDMA/PTSD research brings with it mainstream acceptance and credibility, connects us with the leading PTSD researchers, and creates the possibility of future DoD funding.

Only very recently, aided by Richard’s passion, hard work, wisdom, warm and insightful manner with people, as well as his connections, have we been able to move forward in partnership with the VA and DoD. We overcame barriers together that MAPS alone had been unable to surmount for over 20 years. “Richard would create the opportunities for dialogue and shep-

Richard Rockefeller was instrumental in building conversations between MAPS and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs National Center for PTSD.
Begin with the end in mind then work backward to plan for reaching ambitious goals
—Ashawna Hailey, who left $5.5 million to MAPS in her will

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herd them to a successful resolution,” Doblin said.

As a direct result of Richard’s intervention, the potential of MDMA-assisted psychotherapy to treat veterans suffering from chronic, treatment-resistant PTSD is now being explored with the full cooperation of the VA and DoD. Last year, the VA spent over $5.5 billion in PTSD disability payments to over 275,000 veterans, numbers which are increasing each year.

“While that staggering sum and the human misery that it represents would seemingly have been enough to motivate the DoD and VA to explore all possible treatment options for PTSD,” Doblin continued, “it was only when Richard began his efforts to help us overcome the political resistance that this potential is finally beginning to be explored at the DoD and VA.”

VA National Center for PTSD Executive Director Paula Schnurr wrote to Doblin after he informed her of Richard’s death. “I think everyone who knew Richard even a little felt the loss. He had an exceptional humanity that touched people immediately,” she wrote. “Sadly, I have been learning more about him through his death than I had learned from working with him on the MDMA project. His legacy is far-reaching.”

Richard’s obituary in The New York Times (June 23, 2014) included a quote from his younger sister Eileen Rockefeller Growald, who “recalled how during the birthday celebration, she and Richard had talked about his latest passion: calling attention to a drug for post-traumatic stress disorder, MDMA. ‘When I asked Richard how is it going, he said, “It’s going incredibly well,” ’ she recalled. ‘“And the strangest thing happened,” he said. “They told me they didn’t need my help anymore. They’ve gotten the word out.”’

In a tribute to Richard, Doblin described a recent dream. “Yesterday morning, I dreamt that Richard and I were meeting at a restaurant with Stuart Feinhor, talking about the progress we were making with our Boulder MDMA/PTSD study. Richard left the table for a moment and Stuart and I continued our discussion. Richard was gone for some time. Slowly, a terrible feeling started to dawn on me that Richard wasn’t coming back and that I had to carry on without him, a feeling so many now have in our waking lives.”

“PTSD is never a solitary event for the person who has it; like an infectious disease, the ripple effects go on and on. The suffering spreads to their family and their communities.”
—Dr. Richard Rockefeller