It’s a wintery morning in Wells River, Vermont, the kind of day when most people in the middle of their tenth decade would be forgiven for staying indoors wrapped in an old sweater or two. But Harry Rowe, M.D. ’43, has been up and about for hours. Neatly dressed with his tie firmly knotted under his sweater vest, he’s been out the door of his house on Main Street for his daily trip to the post office to pick up the mail for the Wells River Clinic, then back to the clinic, which is conveniently located in a building attached to his house. The physical attachment of clinic and home is telling, for if anyone in Wells River can be said to have lived a life connected to the needs of his community, it would be Dr. Harry Rowe.

“Money is secondary,” a young physician named Harry Rowe wrote to his wife Mary in 1945, “And service and life with you and my family are primary.”
There is one other name that comes to mind when thinking of the community connection — Mary Rowe, Harry’s wife of 62 years, who died in 2002. Together the Rowes, with careful planning, set their sights on building a medical practice in the Connecticut River Valley just after the end of the Second World War. They soon built just that, and much more. Working together, they attended to all the needs of their community in medicine, education, and the arts. As Stephen Generreau, M.D., a local physician who is now a partner in the Wells River Clinic, told Vermont Life in an article about the Rowes published in 2002: “Their sense of civic duty is so strong that you get the sense that there’s not enough that they can do. They’re always looking to do more.” For his work, Harry Rowe was given the 1981 UVM Physician Alumnus of the Year Award, the precursor to the Medical Alumni Association’s (MAA) Service to Medicine & Community Award. This June, at Reunion 2008, his life of service will be recognized with the highest honor the MAA bestows — the A. Bradley Soule Award.

“I’m deeply honored by this award,” says Rowe, as he sits at his kitchen table looking over notes he’d begun to make for his remarks at the Reunion ceremony. “I have so many people to thank, so much to cover!” At age 95, Rowe is the oldest person ever honored with the Soule Award. The life he has lived, and the lives of all the people throughout the community whom he has touched (and who would be glad to thank him) is indeed hard to summarize.

Harry Rowe was born October 10, 1912, in the Northeast Kingdom town of Peacham. He was the eighth child of nine born to parents who farmed and ran a general store in nearby Barnet. “I grew up working,” he says. “In our household, we were expected to work, whether it was around the field or leading a horse or cultivator.”

It was the act of leading a horse that brought Rowe to his first interaction with medicine — as a patient. One day when he was nine years old, he and his six-year-old sister Polly were leading a team of two horses back to the barn on the Peacham farm. Suddenly, one of the horses spooked and reared, kicking Harry soundly in the head. “I went flying over the fence,” he recalls. “And my sister made her way around the horses and back to the house and told them I was dead! When they first saw me, I believe they agreed with her diagnosis.” Rowe was still very much alive, but he spent nine days in the hospital in St. Johnsbury recovering, and to this day has a small piece of skullbone missing on the side of his head. “The doctor told me he had to remove about a teaspoon-full of brain when he closed me up,” says Rowe. “It never affected me much — I just speak a bit lightly, and I can’t whistle.”

But by now he was not alone. While teaching, Rowe had to put off matriculating at UVM while he continued working odd jobs and living on a budget of three dollars a week. He still had enough free time as an undergraduate to run cross-country and sing in the glee club. It was while doing the latter that he first met Mary Whitney, a doctor’s daughter from Northfield, Vermont, who accompanied the singers on the violin. “She really hit me between the eyes,” he said. It was an encounter that would leave an even more lasting mark on his life than the horse’s hoof. But even this took time. “We went on a few dates, but I wasn’t sure if she really liked me.”

The two drifted apart, and after graduation Rowe took jobs in education for three years — first as principal of the Middletown Springs school, then in Bradford. In this he was following what was practically a family tradition: his three brothers were principals in Bristol, Fairfax, and Waterbury. Rowe taught, coached sports, and studied general sciences on the side. “So I could teach sciences, and go into medicine if I could.” In 1940, he took his savings, plus the money he made by selling his car, and set off for medical school in Burlington.

But by now he was not alone. While teaching, he had written a note to Mary Whitney, and received a warm reply. The two married just before the fall 1940 medical school term began. The shadow of the war hung over Rowe’s class from the beginning. The war created a unique situation at the College of Medicine, where classes were accelerated to ready new doctors for service in the armed forces as quickly as possible. For the first and only time, two separate classes shared a graduation year; Rowe’s class received their degrees in March of 1943, and the class following was graduated in December of that year.

After a brief internship at the Mary Fletcher Hospital, and a training program in West Virginia, Rowe shipped out as the commander of a medical unit in the Army’s 78th infantry division. “My job was to make sure we were at the right place, at the right time,” he says. As Allied forces moved across France and into Germany, the 78th was often in some memorable places. “We were the first medical unit across the Remagen bridge,” he says. By the spring of 1945, the war in Europe was over, but Rowe and his fellow army doctors thought that their jobs had only just begun. “We figured we were just about to be shifted to the Pacific to take part in the invasion of Japan,” he says.

All through the war, Harry and Mary Rowe had communicated with letters written almost daily. Mary spent the war running a boarding house in a rented house in Burlington, raising their young son, Alan, and playing violin as a charter member of the Vermont Symphony Orchestra. In August 1945, a letter from Dr. Rowe arrived in the boarding house mail slot that contained, in essence, the family’s next 60 years in a nutshell. Sitting in his tent in occupied Germany, Harry Rowe described hearing the news bulletin telling of Japan’s impending surrender. His future, like the futures of millions of other soldiers across the world, was suddenly, wonderfully, focused on home. “The future holds a very interesting question for us,” he wrote to Mary. “But time alone will answer it. What will be the Army’s plan for us if Japan does surrender? If it will only bring me back to you I’ll face most anything else.” Rowe continued in the letter to sketch out their post-war life: get some more train-
Harry Rowe practiced full-time at the clinic for 50 years, attending to the minor and major health care needs of generations of patients on both sides of the Connecticut River — and helping to deliver about 1,200 babies in the process. Practicing at the clinic also meant driving every back road in the surrounding countryside to make house calls, playing a leading role in the improvement of Cottage Hospital in nearby Woodsville, and functioning as the medical examiner for his region. Over the years, Rowe was assisted by several other physicians, including, from 1980 to 1992, his son John Rowe, M.D.’77, and Elizabeth Berry, M.D.’76, who retired in 1988. Today, the clinic is run by Fay Homan, M.D.’90 and Stephen Generaux, M.D. (Another Rowe son, David, earned his M.D. from UVM in 1969.)

Rowe also set about improving the state of family medicine in Vermont. In 1951, he was asked to start a state chapter of what is now the American Academy of Family Practice. He became an ardent recruiter of physicians across the state, and remained active in the national organization for decades. “In 50 years, Harry may have missed one convention,” recalled Marga Sproul, M.D.’76, emerita associate professor of family medicine at the College. The Vermont chapter of the AAFP has twice named Rowe Vermont Family Physician of the Year, and he received the AAFP Distinguished Service Award in 2006. He is also a longtime member and past president of the Vermont Medical Society.

Improving the health of the region was not enough for Harry and Mary Rowe. They had only settled in Wells River for two years when they set about improving the area’s educational prospects too. In 1947, Harry was elected to the local school board. He has been on the board every year since but one, and is today the longest-serving school board member in the nation. Along the way, he led one to have their own room. Harry Rowe formally retired after 63 years of practice, Dr. Rowe works on organizing the 800 letters, like the V-mail at left, he and his wife wrote to each other during World War II. the 20-year effort to form a union school district, and has overseen both the building and rebuilding of the Blue Mountain Union High School. “He believes in kids,” says Tom Page, the school board’s current president. “He believes in the area; he believes in the school. And he sets a good example for public service that everyone should aspire to.” Rowe knows Page very well. He helped deliver him into this world 45 years ago.

Harry Rowe formally retired from medical practice in 2006 — an event that was feted by hundreds of his friends at a party at the high school, and recognized by a formal resolution of the Vermont General Assembly. Today, he continues with his school board service, and with a special project: working with an editor to craft the 800 letters he and Mary wrote each other throughout the war into a publishable piece. He still sees students from the College of Medicine when they come to do preceptorships at the clinic; one student, Sundip Karsan, M.D.’03, summed up his feelings in a way that captures just how much impact one doctor in a small town can have on the world around him: “He is an example of everything that I aspire to be,” Karsan wrote in his senior year. “I truly believe that if I can have part of the impact Dr. Rowe has had on his community, I will be able to call my career a success.”