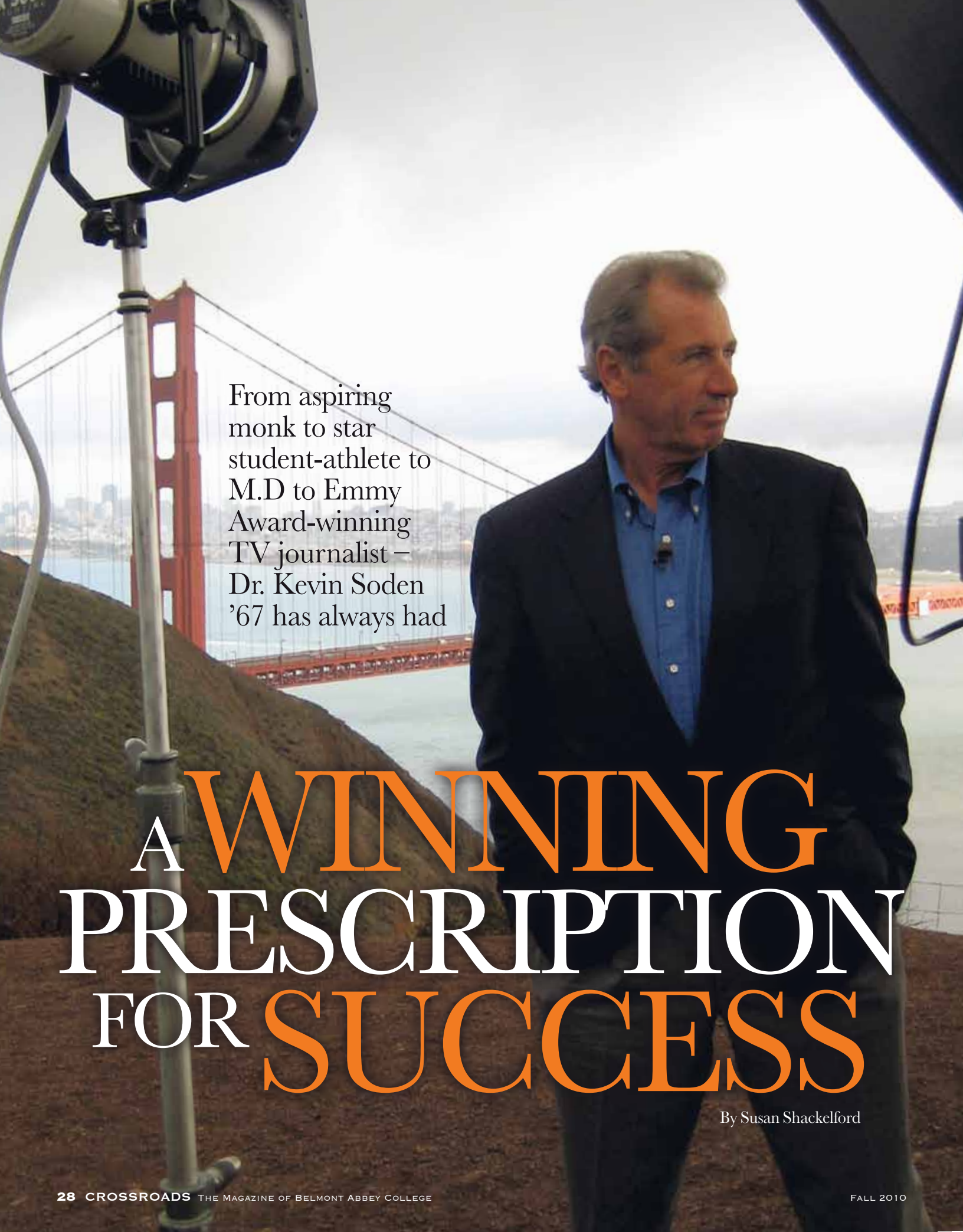

From aspiring monk to star student-athlete to M.D to Emmy Award-winning TV journalist – Dr. Kevin Soden '67 has always had

A WINNING PRESCRIPTION FOR SUCCESS

By Susan Shackelford

DR. KEVIN SODEN WRITES BOOKS AND TRAVELS AROUND THE COUNTRY AS A CORPORATE MEDICAL DIRECTOR AND HOST OF TWO AWARD-WINNING TELEVISION SHOWS ON HEALTH. PREVIOUSLY, HE WAS A LONGTIME EMERGENCY ROOM PHYSICIAN, DIRECTOR OF STUDENT HEALTH SERVICES AT UNC-CHARLOTTE AND THE FOUNDER OF THE OLDEST AND LARGEST PHYSICIAN-OWNED MANAGED CARE PRACTICE IN CHARLOTTE. HIS BUSY FAMILY LIFE INVOLVES KEEPING UP WITH THREE GROWN DAUGHTERS AS WELL AS BEING ACTIVE IN THE LIVES OF HIS WIFE MEG AND THEIR TWO DAUGHTERS, AGES 11 AND 12.

Yet, there's a ribbon of influence that runs through Soden's life, dating back to when he attended high school in Richmond, Va. On a recent day at Charlotte's Olde Providence Racquet Club, the ribbon was in full view, so to speak.

Soden, who turned 65 in July, ambled onto the tennis court wearing a gray T-shirt with blocky red letters saying, "Belmont Abbey Baseball." If you ask, he'll tell you the shirt reflects the great experience he had playing baseball at the College — but that the overall education had the most leavening effect on his life. Here is his story.

Soden moved from Long Island, N.Y. to Richmond with his family when he was three. By the time he was a teenager he wanted to be a monk. The same group of Benedictine monks who run Belmont Abbey ran his Catholic high school. Soden was so impressed by how the monks helped others that he chose Belmont Abbey to follow in their tradition, turning down scholarship offers from Duke and Virginia.

But after a year or so at the College, Soden realized he wasn't well suited to the monastic life. He was interested in playing sports, dating women and wasn't emotionally ready. "It was my level of maturity; I had some growing up to do," he says.

So Soden focused on majoring in history and participating in athletics. He was an all-district pitcher on the baseball team and played first base and outfield as well. He played for the Crusaders in the mid-1960s when Coach Ted Crunkleton built the team into a national force on the small-college level, an experience Soden still savors. "It was great to be a part of it," he says.

Crunkleton ranks Soden among the top pitchers in his 12 years at the Abbey. "He was very similar to (former pro pitcher) Greg Maddux — he could place the ball and change the speed of the ball," Crunkleton says. "And he was a tremendous leader and competitor."

Teammate Bob Healy remembers Soden's zeal for winning and personal improvement. "He was relentless," recalls Healy, who was Belmont Abbey's Alumnus of the Year in 2006. "There was never a point where he thought you'd lost until the game was over. He's a very competitive person and a compelling athlete. He always worked hard, literally constantly; even though, he already had good skills."

In basketball, Soden played guard for one season under Coach Al McGuire. Leg injuries ended his playing days and led him to help with the jayvee team. Soden also joined the fledgling soccer program as a junior and became an All-American goalkeeper on the school's national championship team. "Father Bertrand, an English monk, turned me into a goalie," Soden remembers.

The education at the Abbey also made a big impression on him. "There were so many good people to talk to about leading a good life and doing the right thing by people," Soden says. "It was the little things. People would talk to each other. It was the personal touch. That has made the Abbey great."

When Soden graduated from the Abbey in 1967, it was evident that he believed in the education he had received. He worked two years as a recruiter for the college. During that time, he also earned a master's degree in personnel administration from Florida State and began to think long term about his career. Friends in medical school encouraged him to become a doctor, but not until he took some science courses and earned A's did he seriously consider it. "I gained confidence in my ability," he says.

Soden's decision to go into medicine didn't surprise his friend Healy. "He had the moral compass, was academically gifted and had the spiritual values, including compassion," Healy says.

Soden took his medical-school prerequisites over one year at the Abbey and worked in the Dean of Students office in charge of residence halls. In 1970, he headed to the University of Florida, where later he would be among the inaugural inductees into the medical school's Wall of Fame. He chose to come to Charlotte for his residency in the family medicine program at Carolinas Medical Center (CMC), considered one of the top three such programs in the country at the time, Soden says. "That's where I learned to how to care for people day to day," he says.

But after his residency, he decided to become an emergency-room physician at CMC rather than go into private practice. "The idea of being in an office nine to five didn't appeal to me," he says. "The excitement of never knowing what is going to come through door did. It's like athletics. You're constantly adjusting. One minute you may be handling a heart-attack victim, the next minute delivering a baby."

Though Soden would go on to work in emergency medicine for 23 years, his medical horizons were always wider. He served as director of student health at UNC Charlotte from 1978 to 1982; became medical director for manufacturer Celanese in 1982; founded the physician-owned preferred provider organization, Health Care Savings, in 1984; and obtained a master's degree in public health from the University of Wisconsin in 2001. Today he is the worldwide corporate medical director for Texas Instruments and Cardinal Health.

But many people in the Charlotte region — and nationally — know Soden from television. In 1982, he responded to a newspaper ad looking for someone to do health stories at the CBS affiliate in Charlotte, WBTV. "I thought it would be fun to do something new and different," says Soden, who went on to do spots three times a week over nearly eight years.

Audiences liked him. He later did similar reports in the 1990s for the NBC News Channel and appeared regularly on NBC's Today Show. Today he hosts two health-related shows targeted at seniors and aging Baby Boomers, pro-

duced by the Retirement Living Television (RLTV). The shows can be seen in Comcast cable markets as well as on Verizon FIOS television.

In 2009, he won an International Freddie Award, Cine Award and a regional Emmy award for "Whole Body Health," a spin-off of the main show he hosts, "Healthline." In 2008, he won another regional Emmy for "best host" for "Whole Body Health" and three Tellys for "Heathline."

An hour-long documentary he hosted as part of the Healthline series, "Polio Revisited," also won recognition in 2008 — a regional Emmy for best historical documentary and the Award in Excellence in Health Care Journalism from the Association of Health Care Journalists. Currently, Soden is in promising talks with Reuters to do health features and a Public Broadcasting System show that would begin airing in early 2011.

David Wasser, executive producer for "Heathline" and "Whole Body Health," notes Soden impressed him from the get-go. He stood out at the audition to host Healthline.

The sample script "was purposely written to trip you up a bit if you're not careful," Wasser recalls. "I knew we were going to crank out a lot of episodes, and I needed someone who was going to empathize with the audience. Kevin not only did that, but he ad-libbed at one point when the script mentioned knee issues. He said, 'So if you have bad knees like I do…' He immediately personalized the story and drew you in. No one else did that."

On the shows, Soden is deft at interviewing guest doctors. "If the doctor gets too technical, Kevin can get them to reframe their argument in layman's term," he says. He also excels on the set. "Kevin is very gracious," Wasser continues. "The tone he sets is one of humor, humility and grace under pressure. You feel like you're working with a class act and that you're going to work hard and play hard."

Apart from TV, Soden has authored or been a major contributor to four books, two with strong consumer components: "Special Treatment: How to Get the Same High-Quality Health Care Your Doctor Gets" and "The Art of Medicine: What Every Doctor & Patient Should Know."

As of late April, he was seeking a publisher for his most recent book, "Women, Stress and Happiness: 10 Steps to Having it All and Saving Your Life." The book features individual chapters on famous, successful women — such as author Mary Higgins Clark, former U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna Shalala and TV personality Paula Zahn, to name a few — and how they have handled the many roles in their lives.

Soden says he wrote the book primarily for his youngest daughters so they would understand the importance of taking charge of their lives and happiness. "Women are the caretakers of the world, especially in families," he explains. "But they often really neglect themselves in the process, which creates illness and stress. I wanted to talk to some of the heroes, women who have done this well."

At Belmont Abbey, Soden is on the alumni Wall of Fame and serves on the school's Board of Trustees. He also helps the College in many ways. Within the last six months alone, he appeared in a College-sponsored video as well as wrote an article for the school's electronic newsletter on the H1N1 swine flu. He says he gives back to the school because it made such a difference in his life and he wants to help continue that tradition. Furthermore, he adds, "It's the right thing to do."

"We all need to give back to our communities and to organizations that make a difference in people's lives — Belmont Abbey does this," he says. "Educating young people and providing them a strong set of ethics and values in the process is the key to the future of this country. The Abbey has done this for years as you can tell by looking at its graduates and all they have accomplished in so many different professions. The College does it with integrity and with a compassion for people. That's why I'm proud to be part of the Abbey family." ■