

Alumni Spotlight: Robert S. D. Higgins, MD, MSHA

Q: During which years did you complete your residency?

A: 1985-1990 (general surgery)

Q: Tell us a little bit about your current position.

A: As Director of the Department of Surgery at Johns Hopkins, I am responsible for the clinical, academic, and research activities of the Department of Surgery, which has 120 faculty and >400 employees. I also serve as the Surgeon in Chief for Johns Hopkins Medicine, which includes The Johns Hopkins Hospital (main campus), Bayview Medical Center, Howard County General Hospital, Suburban Hospital, and Sibley Hospital programs, as well as All Children's Hospital in St. Petersburg, FL. This includes the residency program, the clinical programs and operating rooms, our research enterprise, and fellowship programs at each of those sites.

Q: How did your residency prepare you for working in your field and/or your current role?

A: When I was a resident at the University of Pittsburgh, it was among the busiest transplant centers in the world and as such, we learned to be extremely busy while still exploring innovative ways to take care of patients with end-stage organ failure, as well as elective surgery, trauma, and advanced vascular disease, as part of our clinical experiences. It really was an extraordinary time with fantastic faculty leading our clinical programs and teaching us innovative techniques in the care of patients with these illnesses. We had a number of extraordinary role models, starting with our chair, Dr. Henry Bahnson, and then Dr. Richard Simmons, as well as Drs. Tom Starzl, Marshall Webster, Andy Peitzman, Tony Udekwu, Bartley Griffith, Robert Hardesty, Dr. Watson, and many other extraordinary faculty and staff.

Q: Who were your mentors? What was the most important thing they taught you?

A: My mentors were distinguished, master surgeons and clinicians like Drs. Tom Starzl, Dave Steed, Tony Udekwu, Andy Peitzman, and Marshall Webster, who were dedicated to preparing us for the future. They all taught us the importance of preparation, hard work, and resilience as mentees in the program. They taught us that we could achieve our career goals and aspirations with hard work and academic preparation, which have been invaluable lessons that have resonated throughout my professional career since that time.

Q: What is your favorite memory of residency?

A: My most important memory was the first day I arrived in the cardiovascular ICU and I was asked to get a patient ready for surgery. I gave the nurse a number of orders and she looked at me and said, "I'm not sure I know who you are." I told her I was the first-year resident and she said, "You're the intern! I'm going to have to call your chief, Dr. Marguerite Bonaventura." And so, she called Dr. Bonaventura, who was the chief resident on the service at the time. I felt like I lost my puppy. But she came back and said, "I guess it's ok to do what you said to do." I wasn't thinking very charitable thoughts of this nurse at the time, but she was pretty cute, and it turns out, we hit it off and she we got married five years later; that's my Molly Curran Higgins, who has been telling me what to do since she was an ICU nurse and transplant coordinator. Obviously, that's my most influential and favorite memory, for sure!



Bob and Molly Higgins



Q: Do you have any advice for current residents?

A: I encourage any resident, whether here in our program at Hopkins or at UPMC, to understand that hard work and commitment to perfecting your craft is critically important to your future success, whether you want to be a researcher, educator, or clinician - a strong clinical foundation is critically important to provide you with the experience you need to be successful in academics.

Q: Could you tell us one fun fact about yourself not related to your work or residency?

A: I was fortunate to have a pretty good athletic career in high school (high school All-American running back) before damaging my cartilage and ligaments in college. Three knee operations later - I just had a knee replacement in 2020 and now I'm back to full time surgery and physical activity!