

My Life as a Surgeon:
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August 2021



Questions:

1. Growing up

As an only child raised in the mill town of New Brighton, PA, life was simple. For many, maybe most people in New Brighton, the career plan was to finish high school and then work in the mill. No one in my family had ever gone to college. My father had been a prisoner of war in WW2; then he, too, worked in a steel mill. New Brighton was, in many ways, a wonderful place to live and learn what's important in life - family, faith, friends, hard work, and education. I still have friends from first grade and talk with them often. I wanted to go to college but did not have the money. I commuted to Geneva College, worked as a laborer at Babcock and Wilcox Inc., a steel company with a pipe mill in Beaver Falls, PA from 1965-1968, and was a member of the United Steel Workers Union, Local 1082. I finished college with no debt.

2. Why did you become a doctor?

For some reason, the only thing I ever wanted to be was a doctor. My aunt told me that from the day I was born, every night when my mother put me to sleep, she whispered, "you are going to be a doctor." It worked. Thanks Mom! Our paperboy became a doctor. I had hoped to become a doctor and work with him. I knew no other doctors except for my doctor, and I was afraid of him. Every time I saw him, I got stuck or poked. I knew there was something special in helping the sick get better, and I wanted that. I told very few people outside my family. No one liked the doctor's kids. They had too much money. I did not like them either. Same reason.

3. Why did you become a surgeon?

When I was in college, my father had an emergency gallbladder operation in our small town hospital. His surgeons, Drs. William Coghlan and Vince Cuddy, got him through it. I first met them after his surgery. They asked what I did, and I

told them I wanted to be a doctor. They volunteered, “Be a surgeon. If you get into medical school, we will take you into the OR and show you some operations.” Two years later, when I was accepted to Pitt Med, I called their office. I was told to meet them in the local hospital lobby, wear a coat and tie, be there at 7am, and don’t be late. They mentored me, showed me surgical cases and how to scrub, discussed the upcoming operations, let me use their anatomy book, taught me what the x-rays showed before a case, took me to see tissue slides in pathology, and so much more. They changed my life. I became a surgeon “wannabe” in med school. Drs. Coghlan and Cuddy were and always will be my heroes.

4. When did you decide to become a surgeon? Did you have an epiphany? What was it?

In medical school, everything I heard and learned made becoming a surgeon even better. Surgery seemed to be the most difficult specialty, and that attracted me to it. When I met Dr. Bahnson, I was hooked.

5. Did you develop a clear vision/mission for your surgical career? What was it?

My goal was to be the best doctor I could be, and I hope I reached that one. I always thought that to be an excellent surgeon, you must first be an excellent physician. When I was in practice, I felt like a doctor first and a surgeon second. Not all of my colleagues believed that or agreed with that.

6. Who were your mentors? In what way for each?

Dr. Bahnson was the greatest surgeon and maybe the greatest person I ever met. Dr. Richard Bondi taught me surgical technique and that I could be a surgeon with a spouse and family. Dr. Marshall Webster showed me how it’s done: come to work, do your best, tell the truth, be business professional. Dr. Gerry Buckberg at UCLA taught me to think in a better way.



Early years: Drs. Marshall Webster and David Steed in the mid-1980s in New Orleans

7. Has your career been as envisioned/expected?

I expected to care for people with surgical diseases, and that’s what I did.

8. Expected and unexpected challenges.

When I became interested in wound healing, Dr. Richard Simmons thought it was a good idea. Not everyone agreed with him on that one. I was surprised by that. There was a need for someone to care for patients with difficult-to-heal wounds. I tried to fill that space.

9. Tell us about a low point as a surgeon that led to a life lesson.

At a national vascular surgery meeting, I presented a paper on healing diabetic wounds using a topical growth factor. A surgeon in the audience asked me why I cared about wounds and ointments and told me that I should be in the OR instead, doing what surgeons do. The lesson: Do what's best for the patient. Ignore the naysayers. Help the patients who need you the most. They appreciate what you do.

10. What has been the biggest challenge in your career?

Juggling career and family. I got by with less sleep. I made it through 30 years of practice with the help of Linda, my wife and best friend; she has been side-by-side with me for 45 years with our four kids, their spouses, and 11 grandkids. Thank you, Linda. I love you.

11. Expected/unexpected rewards in your career

I never expected more than being a caring surgeon and doing my best for the patient, and I did that every day. Teaching clinical skills and surgical technique to medical students and surgical residents was very satisfying.



*Middle Years: Bahnson Lecture, 2002.
(Front row): Drs. Ralph Siewers, Michael Deeb,
Henry Bahnson, Andrew Peitzman, and David
Steed
(Back Row) Drs. Peter Ferson and Brad
Thompson*

12. What has been the greatest reward(s) in your career?

When patients say things like, "Thank you, Dr. Steed, for taking care of me and getting me better," that is the biggest reward, over and over.

13. What would you do differently in your career?

I would probably still be a surgeon, but there are many new areas in medicine from which to choose.

14. Of what accomplishment are you most proud/gratified in your career?

I had board certification in general surgery, vascular surgery, and surgical critical care. I believe I was the first surgeon at Pitt to have surgical critical care board certification (certificate #167). The establishment of the David L. Steed Excellence in Teaching Award in Vascular Surgery is what makes me the most proud, along with receiving the Golden Apple Award from the medical students twice. I was President of the Wound Healing Society and helped to make wound healing mainstream. I was shocked to receive the Pitt Surgical Alumnus of the Year Award in 2009. I am still not sure how I was selected for that.

15. What advice do you have for those entering a career in surgery?

Live your dream. Don't be distracted from what you believe makes the greatest difference in your world. I am proud to be one of the Pitt Surgeons. Dr. Tim Billiar has continued the legacy and has made the Department of Surgery even better. I knew both Drs. Harbison and Bahnson, and I am certain that they are proud of Tim and the department. I hope they are proud of me, too.



Later Years - 2008, The Dinosaur Club: The best friends I could ever have. (Left to right): Drs. David Steed, Pete Ferson, Andy Peitzman, Mike Makaroun