

My Life as a Surgeon: Dr. Marshall W. Webster



Questions:

1. Growing up

I was born just before start of WW2 (1939), and I grew up in rural Lancaster county. My father was drafted (Navy) and was gone a lot during my earliest years, but my mother was very resilient, and our wonderful extended family in Philadelphia got us through intact. The first year after the war, I went to second grade at a one-room schoolhouse with one teacher, eight grades, and 25 kids. Very early, I developed a strong work ethic, spent many hours on nearby Amish and Mennonite farms, and saved enough to buy my first car three weeks before my 16th birthday (1950 Ford coupe). I started at Penn State main campus when I was still 16, then went on to Hopkins for medical school. I had a rocky start (long story); I flunked Anatomy during the first year and had to repeat in the summer. I rapidly regained my footing. While at Hopkins, I spent six months at Guys Hospital in London, where I learned how enriching a broad experience with the world can be.

2. Why did you become a doctor?

No one in my family had any medical background. In fact, my father was the only one of six siblings to go to college. As a child, we had a family doctor, a “general practitioner,” right out of the Norman Rockwell painting, who made a profound impression. In school I enjoyed science, math, and biology, and early in high school, I decided to be a premed student in college.

3. Why did you become a surgeon?

I loved the technical aspects of surgery, the immediate and tangible results of interventions, and the often intense, somewhat mystical experience in the OR. I was impressed with the coordinated team care, so necessary for success in surgery.

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

I went to Penn for a rotating internship, with the intent to then begin a residency in Medicine. Early in the year, comparing my medical and surgical intern rotations, and reflecting on my Hopkins' medical school experience, I decided to switch. It was a little complex and uncertain. I had been granted a "Berry Plan" draft deferment for a Medicine residency, but managed to get it changed. Dr. Henry Bahnson, who had been on the Hopkins' faculty when I was a student and had just assumed the Chair in Pittsburgh, offered me a PGY-2 position in what at that time was still a combined general/thoracic program. All worked out well, and I ended up dually-boarded. After finishing, I began two years as a surgeon in the Navy. I was stationed at the Philadelphia Naval Hospital during the final years of the Vietnam War (1970-72).

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

I initially thought I wanted to practice in a community setting, and I joined a private group at Hanover Hospital in York County after my Navy discharge. My wife and I (and two children, ages six and four) bought a lovely, 65-acre farm with a classic bank barn, spring house, and an old farmhouse with no bathroom, only an outhouse about 100 yards away. We had an eight-party phone line, and of course, our horse (my wife was already an accomplished equestrian). After about six months, I realized that I really missed the



academic world and accepted an offer from Dr. Bahnson to return to Pittsburgh on the faculty (1973). Little did I guess that 48 years later, Hanover Hospital would be part of the UPMC system.

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

I had many great surgical mentors, though not much “mentoring” in those days. It was more like role modeling. They all led by example. My Hopkins’ class (1964) was the last to have Alfred Blalock as the Chair of Surgery. David Sabiston and a host of other remarkable surgeons were on the Hopkins’ faculty. My first surgical rotation as a third-year student was on Mark Ravitch’s service at the old Baltimore City hospital. Many great surgeons were at Penn also, whose services I rotated on, including Jonathan Rhoads, I. S. Ravdin (who had been one of the surgeons who operated on President Eisenhower), and Brook Roberts, a pioneer vascular surgeon. In Pittsburgh, no one had more impact or was more supportive than Henry Bahnson, and by then Mark Ravitch had come to Pitt. The Watson brothers made a profound impression, both were incredibly skilled private community surgeons. Jim Watson (Andrew’s grandfather) and Bill Watson were remarkably different, creating an interesting contrast - one was trained at Mayo (and Harvard) and the other was Hopkins-trained. Lastly, I would mention Ted Drapanas, who Bahnson recruited to Pittsburgh while Ted was still in his late 30s. I worked in Ted’s lab for my research year (1967-68). During that year, Ted did the first liver transplant performed in Pittsburgh, on which I had the opportunity to assist (at Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh). Ted became the Chair at Tulane and tragically died in his mid-40s in an Eastern Airlines crash at LaGuardia.

7. Has your career been as envisioned/expected?

Yes and no. Actually, I’m not sure what I expected. There is some value in not seeing clearly ahead but traveling through open doors when given the chance, often not knowing what is on the other side. I never remotely anticipated most of what has transpired during my career.

8. Expected and unexpected challenges.

I didn’t realize the extra effort needed for a left-hander to learn the use of right-handed instruments skillfully, starting even with scissors. There were even senior surgeons then who thought that left-handers should not choose surgery.

Fortunately, left-handers tend to be a little more ambidextrous, and in the end, it was not at all an issue.

I never anticipated how rapidly technology would change surgery - the development of minimally invasive surgery, transvascular therapies, and robotics. The rapid, continuous specialization of surgery is never ending. About 10 years into my career, I was able to concentrate fully on vascular surgery and took the first vascular surgery board exam.

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

I had several potentially serious health scares in the early years of my career, leading to concerns about whether I could continue as a surgeon, but all ultimately resolved. Then, I had an MI at age 54. What I learned was we should never make precipitous decisions if not forced, but let events play out. Not that we shouldn't face a reality, but if we aren't careful, we can make unnecessary life decisions that we might later very much regret.

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

Maintaining a healthy work/life balance. A vastly different and unique individual challenge for each of us, but critically important. I met my wife Bonnie, a 19-year-old Penn student, the first week of my internship. We were married the last week and immediately moved to Pittsburgh (56 years ago). We had two children during my residency. We struggled on very low resident salaries but had lots of good times. Once the children were in school, Bonnie went to Chatham, got a degree in Art History, and then at age 37 entered Pitt Law school as a full time student and joined a Pittsburgh law firm after graduation. All took a lot of juggling and effort on all our parts, and Bonnie never failed to support my career as well as hers. Bonnie has been the glue that has kept us all together, from arranging summer vacations at Hilton Head for the past 30 years to the weekly Saturday family Zoom cocktail hour with our children and grandchildren we have had since the beginning of the pandemic.

11. Expected/unexpected rewards in your career?

Working in a large healthcare system offers many unexpected adventures and requests to take on many disparate tasks. A few at random:

1. In 1974, I flew to Paramaribo, Suriname with Larry Carey in an Alcoa corporate jet to operate on an Alcoa executive there with a leaking AAA. We brought him back with us three days later.
2. In 1983, I spent a month in China with Bahnson, Ravitch, Starzl, and Chuck Watson, shortly after the cultural revolution, visiting and lecturing in eight major cities.
3. I was an Executive Vice President of UPMC and President of Physician Services and UPP for 10 years (2002-2012).
4. I was the UPMC General Surgery Residency Director for many years. I have had a long interest in graduate medical education (GME), and currently serve as Board Chair of UPMC Medical Education, the sponsoring corporate entity for all GME at UPMC.
5. I served for six years on the Board of the Pennsylvania Patient Safety Authority, the first of its kind, during its early formative years.
6. I was appointed to a 15-member Federal Commission, "VA Commission on Healthcare," charged with reviewing and charting a course for the future of the VA.
7. I served as President of the Society of Clinical Vascular Surgery, advocating for a separate board for Vascular Surgery.
8. At UPMC, I served as Interim Chair of Surgery (1998-1999), Interim Chair of Anesthesiology twice (2013-2015, 2017-2018), and am currently Interim Chair of the Department of Family Medicine. These have all been wonderful experiences, among many, and each highly unique.

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

The recognition and acknowledgement of my contributions by my peers. I was especially honored to be designated a “Distinguished Service Professor” by the University, and by Pitt allowing an endowed chair (funded by UPMC) to be created in my name while I am still a full time faculty member. Michel Makaroun holds the “Marshall W. Webster M.D. Chair in Vascular Surgery.” Tim Billiar was highly supportive of these recognitions. This is a small example of why he has been such an exceptional Chair these past 20 years.

13. What would you do differently in your career?

Not sure I would do anything differently. We all wonder how our lives would have been different had we made different choices, but we can never know, and if we are comfortable (as I think I am) that we made good choices, took advantage of the unique opportunities that were available to us, and are content with the life we have led, that’s enough for me.

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

To have had the opportunity, in many different ways, and over many years, to contribute to the growth and recognition of Pitt and UPMC as a world class academic medical center. It has been a privilege and honor to have been part of that process.

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

- Work hard.
- Maintain the highest levels of honesty and integrity.
- Constantly listen and learn.
- Prioritize well.
- Recognize that your success is highly dependent on the success of those around you. Make them successful.

- Be flexible. The world is always rapidly changing; we need to change too.
- In a large health system like Pitt/UPMC, you can do a lot of different things without leaving Pittsburgh.
- Fill vacuums. There is always something that needs to be done that no one else has tackled.
- It is never a sign of weakness to seek help (personal or professional), ask for advice, or admit a mistake.