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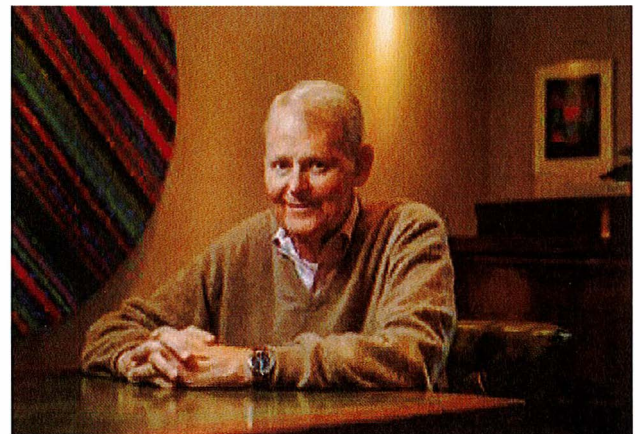
Cover story

Dr. L. Nelson 'Nick' Hopkins: Buffalo's superstar surgeon and Hall of Fame inductee

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When you think about someone who has achieved the kind of success of Dr. L. Nelson "Nick" Hopkins, typical words like fail, rejection and goof-off don't come to mind.

But those are the words Hopkins uses to describe his early years in college, when he didn't get into Dartmouth College – his dream school – and then ended up on academic probation at Rutgers University after too much partying.



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And even after he straightened out and determined he wanted to go to medical school, he received 26 rejection letters before finding a spot at Albany Medical College and earning a medical degree in 1969.

Dr. L. Nelson 'Nick' Hopkins.

Though he's had a storied career in Buffalo as a world-renowned neurosurgeon, Hopkins said he might have ended up somewhere else had his wife Bonnie not been pregnant with their third child when it was time to begin residency programs in neurology and neurosurgery. That's how he ended up at the University at Buffalo, where he pioneered novel treatments for stroke and vascular disease.

"I got the notion that putting catheters in people's heads in the late '60s and early '70s when I was in training, figuring it might be a better way to treat vascular problems," he said. "It was during my neurosurgery training I got this bean-brain idea of how catheters could potentially revolutionize the treatment of vascular diseases in the base of the brain through neurosurgery."

At the time, catheters were the province of cardiologists, who were using them in the heart. No one had made the connection yet of how to access blood vessels in the brain with a similar system.

"Surgeons were opening up the head, lifting the engine and then diving in to try to get to the blood vessels," Hopkins said. "I said, 'Hell, there's a vascular highway. Why can't we just use that?' So I just started doing it, doing crazy things."

Crazy is a gross understatement. Hopkins remembers people thought he was a lunatic and for a long time, the neurosurgery community thought of him as a pariah. Once he proved the method worked, of course, it became commonplace and Hopkins is revered and respected in the neurosurgery world, teaching his methods around the world.

That innovation continued throughout his career. Dr. Elad Levy joined Hopkins in 2001 for a neurosurgery fellowship. He remembers when they developed devices for the thrombectomy procedure, now widely adopted where surgeons pull out blood clots to help treat or prevent a stroke.

"I was fortunate to come in and be on the ground floor but it was his vision and really his legacy. That was Nick's idea. He truly pioneered that," said Levy, co-director of the

Gates Stroke Center and cerebrovascular surgery at Kaleida Health who succeeded Hopkins as chair of the neurosurgery department at the Jacobs School of Medicine & Biomedical Sciences.

Levy attended lectures together where the neurosurgery community was not yet on board, to say the least.

"The comments were: 'You and Dr. Hopkins are cowboys' and 'If we had tomatoes, we would throw them at you,' " he recalls. "This was a comment said to me while I was on stage."

Still, Hopkins told Levy not to be dissuaded. Two years later when they published promising study results, surgeons were interested, and two years after that, other people were taking credit for the work.

"Not only did we live through that change, but created that paradigm shift to stop strokes before they create brain damage," Levy said. "That was Nick's idea. He truly pioneered that."

Levy says it was Hopkins who drove that progress, and who also had the foresight to bring together all the different disciplines under one roof by creating the Buffalo's Gates Vascular Institute.

Today, the GVI has 20 neurosurgeons under one roof and one of the largest robotic spine surgery programs in the country.

"He had the personality, the charisma and the vision to bring all the forces together who were willing to take a chance and create what we think is one of the premier vascular hospitals in the world," Levy said.

Dr. Adnan Siddiqui, vice chairman of the neurosurgery department and chief medical officer at the Jacobs Institute, started following Hopkins' work early in his own career, beginning in the early 90s when he trained in Philadelphia. But under Hopkins, Siddiqui says Buffalo was the mecca for endovascular surgery.

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He trained under several surgeons in Rochester, Syracuse, Boston and Philadelphia with the opportunity to see many neurosurgery chairmen up close. It wasn't until he met Hopkins in 2006 that he found the mentor he says truly changed his career.

"You're always looking for mentors, always searching for that person you would aspire to become as a neurosurgeon," Siddiqui said.

But his prowess as a surgeon is just one factor to which Siddiqui was drawn. He remembers pulling up to the Hopkins' lake house in Canada and finding the driveway littered with children's bikes, skateboards and chalk drawings all over.

"I told my wife, this is the man. He's got his priorities straight," Siddiqui said. "This is a normal human being who cherishes his family."

Siddiqui says Hopkins has a gentle way of influencing thought, providing subtle cues and influence with neurosurgery trainees that allow them to develop their neurosurgery skills.

"Most neurosurgeons tell you exactly what's on their minds, but Nick is not like that. He really builds you up and gradually, gently molds you to make you much, much better and at the same time never taking anything away, always giving," Siddiqui said. "Every credit he gets, he gives it to his team. He molded us in different directions so we all work effectively as a team and yet have room to grow. Neurosurgeons are almost always lone wolves, so for him to create this culture in Buffalo, that's what makes UB Neurosurgery and Gates Vascular Institute unique."

Indeed, Hopkins says his legacy is truly the 60 people who have trained in the program and now run neurosurgery programs around the country. He points to Levy – "a legitimate rock star" and calls Siddiqui "the most gifted surgeon I've ever known in my life."

"The people that we've trained have been trailblazers around the country," Hopkins said. "Our fellows are the leaders all over the country, the guys we trained. That's, I guess, if you talk about a legacy, that's perhaps the most exciting for me."

Dr. L. Nelson "Nick" Hopkins

Founder and chief scientific officer, Jacobs Institute; founder and visionary, Gates Vascular Institute; chair, University at Buffalo Department of Neurosurgery (1989-2013); SUNY distinguished professor

Known as the father of endovascular neurosurgery, a widely accepted practice that uses catheters inserted into arteries to treat vascular disease that previously required major surgery.

College: Bachelor's degree, Rutgers University; M.D., University at Albany

High school: Nichols School

Spouse: Bonnie Adam

Children: Robert, Margaret, Elizabeth

Grandchildren: Janie, Charles, Robert, Zach, Owen, Sam, Amelia, Laurel

First job ever: Steamfitter apprentice

Hobbies: Family, sports, music, art

Proudest professional moment: Opening of the Gates Vascular Institute

How has the industry changed since you started: Technology and minimally invasive approaches to the brain

Favorite thing on your desk: Original sketches of the GVI

One-word self-description: Persistent

Tracey Drury

Reporter

Buffalo Business First

