

By Scott Craven

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Dr. Volker Sonntag's scrapbooks, tucked amid medical textbooks and journals on an overflowing shelf, brim with notes and cards from patients thanking him for returning their lives to them.

The glowing testimonials could form a lofty pedestal for back surgeon Sonntag, who could boast of divinely skilled hands and repairing celebrities' spines, but he sees himself as more down-to-earth.

Sonntag talks about learning English from TV's *Mickey Mouse Club*, and he wistfully reminisces about past jobs, from tending chickens on a farm to tending the grill at Jack in the Box. And he speaks of how he frequently used those gifted hands to knock on strangers' doors to beg for a ride.

Sonntag, a neurosurgeon specializing in spinal surgery, prefers the simpler picture.

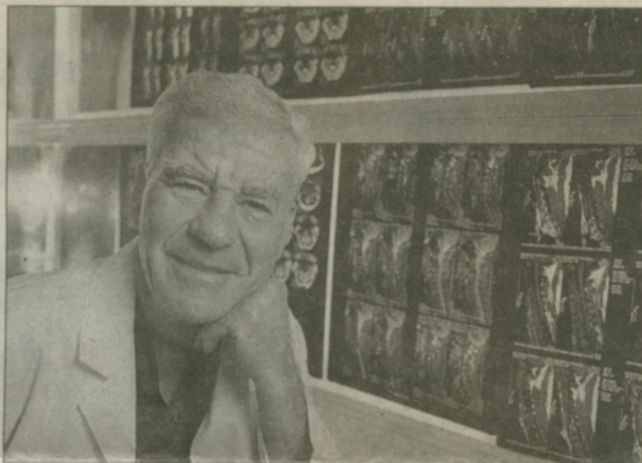
The 57-year-old German-born doctor, upon whom praise has fallen like rain, is clinical as he speaks of his surgical successes at Barrow Neurological Institute in Phoenix. Though he works on the body's most delicate and susceptible areas, where millimeters separate success and failure, he is the only person in the room relatively unimpressed with his remarkable résumé.

Which could be why Sonntag "was overwhelmed" to learn that he will be this year's honored guest at the Congress of Neurological Surgeons, Sept. 21-26, in Philadelphia. The honor is among the highest awards in his profession.

"To be included with the biggest names in neurosurgery is quite remarkable," Sonntag says, modesty muffling any excitement.

Soon, the eyes that blaze with intensity over a surgical mask begin to light up as Sonntag speaks of his non-surgical past. He was 12 in 1957 when his family, escaping a dire economic future in West Germany, moved to Phoenix, chosen because that's where the man sponsoring the family's immigration happened to live.

"I remember so clearly my brothers and I rushing over to the globe to see where Phoenix was," Sonntag says. "And



Roger Monroe

Dr. Volker Sonntag has built a prominent career at Barrow Neurological Institute, in his adopted hometown of Phoenix.

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Barrow back surgeon remains as humble as his immigrant roots

success story

then we found it. That was all we knew about Phoenix. It was a dot in America."

Sonntag describes each memory as if he is holding a photo capturing the scene:

■ The arrival at New York Harbor. "Seeing the Statue of Liberty — I was in awe."

■ Taking the train to Arizona. "It was sunset, and I saw shadows all over the hills, these 'people' holding up their hands and, yes, that was the first time I'd seen saguaros."

■ Moving into a two-room home near 19th Avenue and Camelback Road with his parents and two brothers. "It was more like a shed, but it was home. I drove by it a few months ago and noticed it had finally been demolished."

Sonntag developed his work ethic on a chicken farm. He'd spend three hours after school feeding and cleaning up after the hens at the farm near Camelback Road and Central Avenue. At quitting time, he'd often knock on the windows of nearby houses hoping to score a ride home.

"That's how I'd get around," Sonntag says. "I couldn't afford the bus, and my parents couldn't pick me up. In those days, people were happy to give me a ride. It worked. It wouldn't now, of course."

In high school, Sonntag worked in a restaurant in Legend City, an amusement park that was adjacent to Phoenix Municipal Stadium, and, when the park went out of business, he landed a job at Jack in the Box.

"In those days, it (the restaurant) was a square and really looked like a jack-in-the-box," Sonntag says, smiling. "Clever."

He reels off his medical career easily, which includes the usual degrees and residencies before he returned to Phoenix in 1978 to practice neurology.

You likely have never heard of Sonntag, but he is a legend in his field. He's operated on noted spines, those belonging to celebrities, athletes and royalty.

* But the former chicken handler and burger flipper refuses to be dazzled by his clientele's fame.

"Once they are on the table,

prepped and ready to go, it does not matter who it is," Sonntag says. "One is as important as another."

Known for his intensity in the operating room, Sonntag sheds his focused demeanor as easily as his scrubs. He is one of the most approachable doctors on the staff, discussing a complex operation one moment and German soccer the next. (He's an avid soccer fan, coaching his youngest son's team and arranging his schedule around soccer practice.)

"Nearly all of the residents have a great rapport with him," says Dr. Geoffrey Zubay, in the last year of a seven-year neurosurgery residency at Barrow. "It's a very fraternal atmosphere rather than in some programs, where residents are chastised until their tails are between their legs."

Sonntag's good nature belies his competitive spirit. Each year, he and Dr. Robert Spetzler lead residents on two demanding hikes: rim to rim in the Grand Canyon and along the upper portion of Oak Creek Canyon.

Sonntag believes in camaraderie as much as he does in mentoring, and some of his career highlights include thank-you notes from former residents.

Each of those letters can be found stuffed into his scrapbooks among another source of joy: cards from appreciative former patients.

The scrapbooks serve not to put Sonntag on a pedestal but to remind him of his place in the lives of others.

Reach the reporter at (602) 444-8773.

Sonntag's 5 reasons people should become mentors

■ Everyone needs someone to look up to and emulate. It is the antithesis to Charles Barkley's statement, "I am not a role model."

■ Mentoring forces people to keep up with the latest trends and cutting-edge technology in their fields of expertise.

■ It is a rewarding experience.

■ While students learn, mentors learn something about themselves.

■ Mentoring builds integrity, honor and respect in everyone involved.