

Dr. Volker Sonntag Blends Skill, Empathy

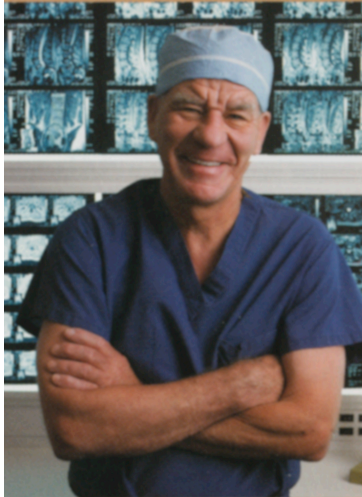
CLAS alumnus Dr. Volker Sonntag has received no shortage of attention over his career. As one of the world's most renowned neurosurgeons and a pioneer in spinal neurosurgery, he not only has been showered with gratitude from his patients but also with honors from his profession.

Sonntag is consistently rated as one of Phoenix's top doctors in an annual survey of his peers. He has been named Mentor of the Millennium by his surgical residents and Teacher of the Year seven times. He has been recognized as the Honored Guest of the Congress of Neurological Surgeons, among the highest commendations in his field.

The accolades haven't come only from the medical community. This spring Sonntag received his latest honor—ASU's Alumni Achievement Award. He earned his bachelor's degree in chemistry from ASU in 1967.

"I'm very appreciative of my ASU education," Sonntag said when accepting the award. "I spent my first two years at ASU filled with awe and wonder studying philosophy. I ended up majoring in chemistry, which paved my way to medical school. This well-rounded education helped me then with my continued studies and helps me today with my patients and residents."

Due to his well-known surgical skills, Sonntag's patients have included athletes, celebrities and even Saudi royalty. He also has performed his share of high-profile "miracles," such as realigning a child's head to his spinal column



following a bicycle accident. His patients seek him out because of his reputation in the operating room, but they also get a genuinely compassionate physician at their bedside.

"As physicians, we bring our life experience into treating our patients, not just by pharmacology and technology but also with attentive listening and empathy," he says.

Sonntag's outlook on life and medicine was formed early. Born in Germany at the end of World War II, Sonntag was 6 when his father became disabled by a brain abscess. Five-and-a-half years later, his family immigrated to the United States after his mother found sponsors in

Phoenix. Although he spoke no English at first, Sonntag found work to help his family. His jobs included emptying trash, cleaning up at a chicken farm and flipping burgers at Jack in the Box.

"Every day I remember that someone once gave me and my family a chance," Sonntag says. "Now, I'm fortunate enough to be able to do the same for someone else."

Apart from his own medical practice, one of Sonntag's great passions is training residents at Barrow Neurological Institute. He is known not only for leading them through the rigors of neurosurgery but also for encouraging them to develop interests outside of medicine.

"Budding physicians need a varied and enlarging cultural experience," says Sonntag. "Surgery is not a perfect science, and the more balanced approach we can bring to it the better for our patients and ourselves."