

Striking a balance

World-renowned neurosurgeon makes time for family



PROVIDER
PHYSICIAN

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Dr. Volker Sonntag gets chided by fellow neurosurgeons at Barrow Neurological Institute for being so efficient.

His desk always is clean and in order, never gathering a pile of paperwork or dust.

"He's one of those people who irritates me a great deal when I walk into his office," said Dr. Robert Spetzler, director of BNI. "His desk is always clean. He takes care of things right away. It's a great attribute to have. It is very depressing to those of us who don't have it."

Sonntag figures the paperwork needs to get done anyway, so he might as well do it now. Certain parts of his desk are reserved for certain projects, including a stack of papers for editorial review boards he just finished for four medical journals.

He pats the empty spot proudly, knowing only too well that it will be filled again on Monday because he sits on editorial peer review boards for 10 journals.

Sitting does not appear to be in Sonntag's vocabulary. When he walks, it is quickly and with a purpose. At age 59, Sonntag still plays soccer and coaches his sons' soccer teams.

He also talks quickly; his thick German accent sometimes making him difficult to understand. His tanned skin contrasts sharply with his light blue eyes and short white hair. His fingernails are kept short and efficiently clean, ready to perform surgery at a moment's notice.

"When he speaks English, he has a significant German accent," Spetzler said. "When he speaks German, he has an even worse American accent. I can correct him in both languages."

Both were born in Germany in November 1944. Both middle children, they married nurses in 1974 and completed medical training in 1977.

They also both were honored guests of the Congress of Neurological Surgeons, the highest honor for their profession.

Although Spetzler enjoys teasing his colleague, he has the greatest respect for him.

"He has a commitment to his patients, to research endeavors and to the education of the residents, fellows



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and medical students that is second to none," Spetzler said. "He's been a superb partner and a great friend."

Born in West Prussia, Sonntag spent his toddler years in a West Germany refugee camp, where his younger brother was born.

After World War II, his father stopped practicing dentistry because he developed an abscess on his brain and needed surgery. He became an invalid, leaving his wife to care for him and their three sons.

In 1957, Sonntag's mother decided to emigrate and found a sponsor in Arizona to help her start a new life for her family in the United States.

Sonntag was 12 when he left all his friends behind in Germany. He was not happy.

The boat ride to New York was a long and nauseating experience for the young Sonntag. But when he finally got up and went to the top of the ship on a dark, gray morning, he saw the Statue of Liberty in the distance.

"It was an unbelievable feeling," he said.

He didn't know a word of English, learning to speak his new language by watching "The Mickey Mouse Club" on television.

He grew up poor, with all three brothers and their mother working to eke out an existence in a Phoenix trailer

park. His first job was at that trailer park, which was owned by the sponsor who brought the family to Phoenix.

He dug ditches, cleaned garbage dumpsters and anything else that needed to be done around the trailer park to help his mother put food on the table.

Later, he flipped burgers at Jack in the Box, eventually becoming a night supervisor. He worked his way through medical school at the University of Arizona, becoming part of the first class to graduate from the school in 1971.

He continued to play soccer while an undergraduate student at Arizona State University and a medical student at UA. For the past 14 years, he has coached his two sons' soccer teams.

Every Monday and Wednesday at 5 p.m., his secretary blocks out his calendar for soccer practice.

Unlike many driven surgeons, Sonntag has managed to keep his family in balance. He has been married to his wife for 30 years.

"He's a great example to the residents and medical students on how you can balance profession and family," Spetzler said.

Now that his two older children are in the work force and at ASU, Sonntag spends a lot more time with his youngest son, a 12-year-old with a penchant for flying through the air, whether it's on a trampoline or on the back of a moped.

"Weekends are for family," Sonntag said.

Dr. Volker Sonntag

Title: Vice chairman, Division of Neurological Surgery
Affiliation: Barrow Neurological Institute

Residence: Phoenix

Age: 59

Spouse: Nancy

Children: 3

Education: Arizona State University, *Summa Cum Laude* in chemistry; University of Arizona Medical School

Associations: Residency program director of Barrow Neurological Institute; American Association of Neurological Surgeons; Academy of Neurological Surgeons; American Board of Neurological Surgeons; *Neurosurgical Society of America*; North American Spine Surgery

What constitutes a health care hero? "An individual who cares for patients, his community and his family by being a leader in his/her field of interest, contributing to the community both with time, energy, financially, as well as leading an exemplary family life. Being a mentor and leading by example to residents, fellows and medical students."

Why did you choose your current career path? "My interest in medicine has been present since my early years in education. I chose neurosurgery in particular because it was attractive to my personality. Sometimes it takes time and research to make the diagnosis and then a complex surgical procedure in an attempt to correct them."

What is the biggest challenge of your current role? "Continuing to keep up with evolving neurosurgery, especially in the spine, and continuing to be versatile in the operating room to add the respect of my colleagues and peers and the residents and fellows."

What is your proudest professional accomplishment? "Honored guest at the Congress of Neurological Surgeons in 2002."

How do you want to be remembered? "I would like to be remembered as somebody who attempts to strike the perfect balance with passion for work, passion for family and passion for life."

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Volker Sonntag