A Life in Full

The "Most Interesting Man in the World" built a brand on improbable adventures. James D. Morrissey, MD '64, built a life on them. BY RENÉE GEARHART LEVY

Dr. Morrissey on Gaurishankar in the Himalayas in 1979

There's a moment when measuring the risk of a particular challenge where most people stop.

For James D. Morrissey, MD '64, risk was never a reason to walk away—only something to calculate.

He didn't stop when he fell 60 feet while climbing in British Columbia. He didn't stop when half his mountaineering team was killed on an early Himalayan expedition. He didn't stop when he was initially rejected from medical school, or when the U.S. Navy turned him away over a spinal injury. And at nearly 90 years old, he still hasn't stopped—performing hundreds of procedures a year and showing up, day after day, for the patients who depend on him.

For nearly six decades, Morrissey has approached medicine, mountaineering, and life itself with the same philosophy: prepare relentlessly, embrace difficult challenges, and never lose sight of the people depending on you. The former Syracuse lacrosse player, Peace Corps physician, and pioneering heart surgeon built Stockton, California's open-heart surgery program from the ground up while simultaneously becoming one of the world's elite climbers, leading expeditions on some of the planet's most dangerous peaks. Today, working full time, Morrissey remains driven by the same instinct that carried him from the Adirondacks to Tanzania to the Himalayas: if something meaningful seems difficult, it's probably worth attempting.

"It's sort of a risk-benefit deal," he says. "That's something I've applied my whole life. And if something looked challenging, that usually made it more interesting to me."

The same risk-benefit calculation guides his work in medicine.

"Is the patient going to be better off when I finish this than they were when we started?" he asks. "You always think of the patient first. That's the oath we take."

Long before the operating rooms and international expeditions, Morrissey was a sharp-minded Long Island kid who enrolled at the New York State College of Forestry in Syracuse to study pulp and paper engineering. The coursework was demanding, but he still found time for fun. At the time, SUNY ESF students could participate in Syracuse University extracurriculars.

He joined a fraternity, wrestled as a freshman, and then walked on to the lacrosse team after spending months tossing a ball around with his roommate.

"I had never even seen a lacrosse game till I played in one," he says.

The 1957 National Championship Syracuse University lacrosse team. Dr. Morrissey is number 87.

A lefty with unusual ambidexterity, he became part of one of Syracuse lacrosse's standout eras. The 1957 team his junior year went undefeated, with three teammates drafted to professional football careers, including Jim Brown.

Despite the high caliber of competition, Morrissey had his own priorities.

"I studied all the time on the bus while they were goofing off," he recalls.

His teammates nicknamed him "Brain."

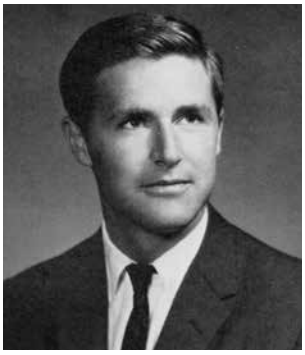
After graduation, Morrissey headed to British Columbia to work in a pulp mill. Within six months, he knew he wanted something different.

"I decided I wanted to go to medical school," he says.

He returned to SUNY ESF as a graduate assistant while completing medical school prerequisites, then applied to Upstate, Albany Medical College, and Harvard. ("Why not?" he says.)

He was rejected by all three.

Instead of giving up, Morrissey took a job at Upstate working with biochemist Ibert C. Wells, PhD, spending a year cannulating the bile ducts of baby rats for cholesterol metabolism studies while preparing to reapply. When another Upstate rejection arrived, he wrote the admissions committee a blunt letter.



Dr. Morrissey in an early scouting photo (top) and his 1964 Upstate yearbook photo (bottom)

"I told them they were making a terrible mistake," he says.

The College of Medicine had never admitted a student from the forestry school, but the committee agreed to an interview.

During the meeting, anatomy professor David Whitlock, MD/PhD, discovered Morrissey was an experienced fly fisherman who had taught the sport for years at a Boy Scout camp. Whitlock was also an avid fly fisherman. That connection helped open the door.

Soon after classes began, Morrissey made another impression. While speaking with Dr. Whitlock in anatomy lab, he recognized signs of nystagmus after the professor spun around on a stool to speak with him.

"How did you know that?" Whitlock asked. "You haven't taken that course yet."

"I read the book," Morrissey replied.

In fact, he had read all of the year's textbooks before classes even started.

Whitlock told Morrissey he had scored a 96 on the first anatomy exam. The class average was 49.

"I decided then that I was going to keep the bar high," Morrissey says.

He had plenty of motivation. His father had died while he was in high school, and Morrissey was supporting himself through medical school. He worked nights disposing of radioactive research animals, held shifts in the library, continued assisting in the biochemistry lab, and even shoveled snow for Syracuse University Chancellor William Tolley.

Still, he excelled academically, earning the respect and mentorship of faculty.

"The thing that made Upstate unique during the time I was there was that the teachers and students became very close," he says.

Faculty members created remarkable opportunities for him. He spent two summers studying the isolated iris of Lopheus piscatorius (angler fish) at Woods Hole Marine Biology Laboratory under future Nobel Prize winner George Wald and another summer in Central Africa studying Burkitt's lymphoma through an American Cancer Society fellowship.

That experience shifted his interests from ophthalmology to surgery.

Another mentor then arranged for Morrissey to spend three months in Bern, Switzerland, training with pioneering heart surgeon Åke Senning.

"I mean, what can be better than that?" he says.

It was there, with the Alps visible from the operating room, that both cardiac surgery and mountaineering fully took hold.

"I was sunk after that," he says.

Morrissey graduated as class valedictorian, earning election to Alpha Omega Alpha and receiving the Rosch Award for Outstanding Student of Medicine.

With the Vietnam War escalating, Morrissey initially planned to serve through the Berry Plan at a tropical research station in Ethiopia. But a spinal injury from that climbing fall in British Columbia disqualified him during his Navy physical.

Instead, he joined the U.S. Public Health Service and became one of the early Peace Corps physicians in Tanzania.

After completing an internship at Washington Univer-

The team that successfully summited the East Face of Everest in 1983. Morrissey is in the first row, third from right.

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sity in St. Louis, Morrissey spent nearly three years caring for hundreds of volunteers and helping lead a mass immunization effort that contributed to the eradication of smallpox in Tanzania.

"I met the president of Tanzania one of my first days there," he says. "I actually have a letter from him saying I can hunt anywhere, anytime in Tanzania."

Morrissey later returned to Washington University to complete surgical and cardiothoracic training at Barnes Hospital. He'd ended up at WashU under the direction of Upstate surgery professor C. Barber Mueller, MD, who had trained there himself. "I think 10 out of 12 surgical interns were valedictorians of their medical school class," he says. "We got enormous hands-on experience. It was a great place to train."

In 1972, Morrissey was preparing to remain on faculty when he learned of an opportunity in Stockton, California. A thoracic surgeon there wanted to establish a heart surgery program in a region that had never supported one.

"We were probably the only two people in San Joaquin County who thought Stockton was ready for heart surgery," Morrissey says.

Dr. Morrissey in an ice cave during the Dhaulagiri expedition in 1973.

At the time, the field itself was still evolving.

"Coronary bypass just started in 1967," Morrissey says.

What followed was a true ground-up effort to build an open-heart surgery program from scratch, requiring buy in from cardiologists, referring physicians, and the broader community. Success wasn't guaranteed.

"You can't just walk in and be a heart surgeon," he says.

Morrissey leaned on the intensive training he received at Barnes Hospital, where he performed an extraordinary volume of procedures—more than 1,500 thoracotomies during residency.

"There's no place else in the world where you could have done that much," an examiner later told him. Morrissey trained nurses, anesthesiologists, perfusionists, and surgical assistants from scratch. When the hospital hesitated to purchase costly equipment, he bought key items himself so the team could train.

He even established a makeshift experimental surgical unit at the University of the Pacific so the staff could practice before entering a live operating room.

Two years later, in November 1974, the program performed its first successful open-heart surgery. In the early years, colleagues recall Morrissey sleeping near the intensive care unit so he could monitor patients overnight during critical recovery periods.

The program at St. Joseph's Medical Center grew to become a cornerstone of cardiac care in the region. Morrissey served as chief of cardiothoracic surgery until 1991. In 2021, he received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the San Joaquin Valley Medical Society and the following year St. Joseph's renamed its Heart Institute the Morrissey Family Heart & Vascular Institute in honor of Morrissey's 50 years of caring for the community.

"If you want to call us the watchdogs of the patients, you can call us that. I think it's really important that right from the top someone is the champion of the patient at all times. Human kindness is at the forefront and base of our philosophy. That is the bottom line," says Morrissey.

But while Morrissey was building one demanding life, he was simultaneously living another.

An Eagle Scout, his introduction to serious climbing came shortly after high school when he spontaneously climbed the 14,000-foot Grand Teton

unroped and unguided while visiting Wyoming as part of a Boy Scout Indian dance competition.

"It was really fun," he says. "That was the start."

Over the years, he climbed throughout the Adirondacks, British Columbia, the Alps, and Africa. By the late 1960s, he had developed a reputation among elite mountaineers and, while a third-year surgical resident, was invited to serve as physician on the first American expedition to Dhaulagiri, the world's seventh-highest mountain.

The climb ended in tragedy when half the team, including the expedition leader, was killed.

Nonetheless, his team remained undaunted. "We'd choose the highest unclimbed mountain in the world and go after it," says Morrissey, who led the first ascent of the Trango Tower in Pakistan in 1977, the first ascent of Gaurishankar in Nepal in 1979, and the first ascent of the east face of Mt. Everest in 1983.

"One man's horror is another man's pleasure," he told the *New York Times* at the time.

For years, he served as a U.S. representative to the Union of International Alpine Associations, advocating for climbing oversight and warning about the dangers of inexperienced commercial guiding operations. After he and several other serious climbers retired, permits to adventure travel companies opened. "It's been a disaster ever since," he says.

The parallels between climbing and heart surgery are fairly obvious. "Both present unexpected challenges. You have to be prepared and you have to be able to keep your head when things aren't going right," he says.

At an age when most surgeons have long since retired, Morrissey is still putting that mindset into practice. In one recent two-week stretch, he performed more than 30 procedures. He still handles cardiac, thoracic, and vascular surgery cases rather than narrowing his practice.

He's seen a lot of change throughout his career and credits advances in myocardial preservation and beating-heart bypass techniques. At the same time, he worries medicine has become overly dependent on technology and increasingly disconnected from patients themselves.

"You pick up all sorts of stuff just by watching a patient's body language," he says. "Too many doctors and nurses are totally dependent on computers. They've forgotten how to memorize things. I can remember what my patient's creatinine was three days ago."

Even now, retirement doesn't seem to interest him much. There are still patients to care for, fish to catch, stories to tell, and new challenges to take on.

"If I can do it without killing myself, I really should try it," he says with a laugh. "That's been my mantra." ■

Dr. Morrissey during surgery, at right

Carrying it Forward

From Syracuse to Somalia to Upstate, Quinn Morrissey '29 is forging her own path in medicine

In a surgical tent in Mogadishu, Somalia, Quinn Morrissey '29 stood over a wounded patient preparing for something she had never done before: making the first surgical cut into a patient.

Assigned to a forward surgical team supporting Special Operations Forces, the Army Reserve combat medic was accustomed to the intensity of practicing medicine close to active conflict. But this moment was different.

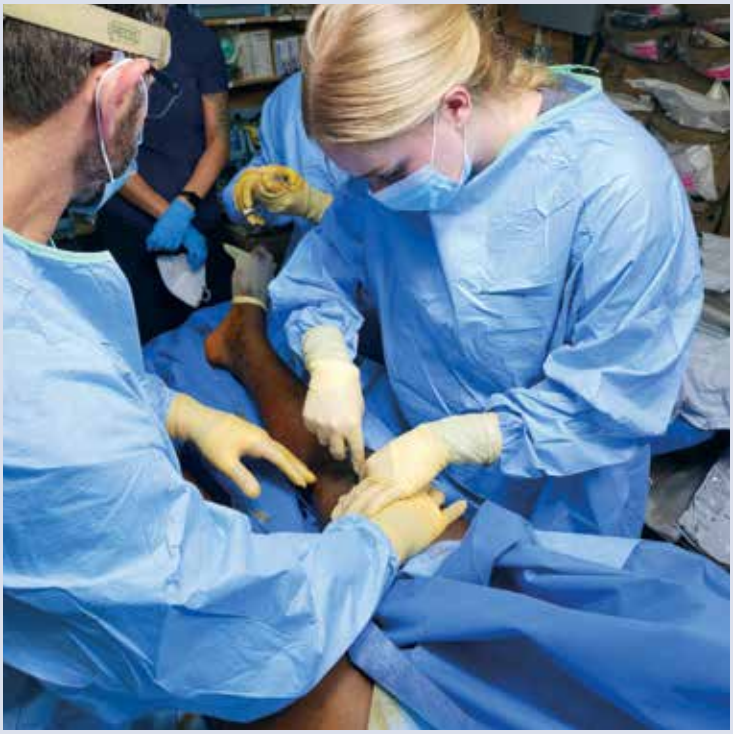
"I scrubbed in for the first time during an orthopedic procedure," she says. "The patient had a gunshot wound to the knee. I made the first cut and got to close. When we were done, I couldn't wait to call my dad and tell him how it went. I was so proud I cried."

The experience confirmed something Quinn had been moving toward for years: surgery was where she belonged.

For Quinn, medicine was never a distant idea. Her father, James D. Morrissey, MD '64, built a distinguished career in cardiothoracic surgery. But while medicine may run in the family, Quinn's path has been uniquely her own.

Raised in California as the youngest of eight siblings, she came to Syracuse University intending to pursue medicine.

Quinn with her father, James



As an Army Reserve combat medic, Quinn Morrissey '29 had her first hands-on surgical experience in Somalia.

Midway through college, feeling the need for a break and a reset, she joined the Army Reserve.

After completing basic training and advanced instruction as a combat medic, she returned to Syracuse and earned her biology degree in May 2020. It was the height of the pandemic, so she remained in Syracuse to complete a master's degree in biomedical forensics while working at Upstate as an operating room scheduler for the burn and trauma surgeons.

Then came deployment to Somalia.

"Our whole role was to be close to the fight," she says.

During her deployment, Quinn's forward surgical team treated more than 80 trauma patients, performing procedures ranging from emergency thoracotomies to orthopedic surgeries. The experience deepened her appreciation for high-pressure medicine and patient care.

Now a second-year medical student, Quinn says she has "fallen in love with surgery," crediting mentors including Moustafa A. Hassan, MD, Joan Dolinak, MD, and Jesse Ryan, MD, for deepening her passion for the field. She is currently considering burn surgery, ENT, and reconstructive plastics.

Outside the classroom, Quinn continues to build a life centered on service. She remains active in the Army Reserve, marking eight years as a combat medic in June. She also serves as a court-appointed special advocate for foster children, assists with provider scheduling at the Rahma Clinic, and recently became certified in Advanced Burn Life Support.

"I do better when I'm busy," she says.

Like her father, Quinn thrives in high-stakes environments. But she is not simply following in his footsteps. She is carving out her own path—one hard-earned experience at a time.