

CHARLES J. RYAN III, MD '82

Second Chances

An accident led surgeon Charles J. Ryan III, MD '82, to focus on fatherhood and community service.

Charles J. Ryan III, MD '82, doesn't recall a time growing up that he didn't plan on becoming a surgeon. His father, Charles B. Ryan, MD '46, was one of the first board-certified general surgeons in Auburn, New York, and he wanted to emulate the important role his dad played in the community. "At the time, there were no ER physicians or orthopedic specialists, so anytime someone came to the hospital with a laceration or a broken bone, my dad had to go in," he recalls.

Like his father, Dr. Ryan came to Upstate for his medical education. Surgeon Patricia Numann, MD '65, served as his advisor, helping guide his surgical path. It was during Ryan's general surgery training at what is now Drexel University College of Medicine that he became interested in vascular surgery, which focuses on blood vessels outside the heart. At the time, there were few accredited specialty programs in the field. "There may have only been 60 to 70 vascular surgery spots in the country," says Ryan, who completed a two-year fellowship program at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit.

After completing his fellowship, Ryan returned to Auburn to join his father—by then 67—and cousin in practice. Upon his arrival, his father retired.

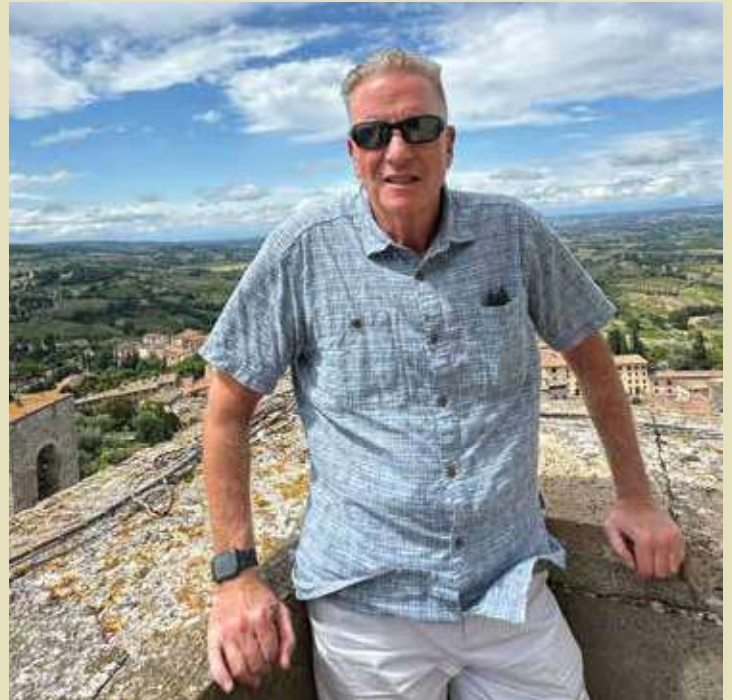
"I was crazy busy," Ryan says of his practice taking off.

Then his life took an unexpected turn. Ryan remembers the day vividly. It was a Sunday. He had conducted hospital rounds at 5:30 a.m. before heading to the golf course. When his game was rained out after 16 holes, he took his three young daughters out for a pancake breakfast and to shop for new bicycles. On their way out of a sporting goods store, a portable basketball backboard came down on his head, fracturing two cervical vertebrae and herniating a cervical disc.

The freak accident caused permanent neurological deficits to his left upper extremity, leaving the left-handed surgeon unable to perform surgery at only 40 years old. "It was very frightening," he says.

Fortuitously, Ryan had recently increased his disability insurance coverage. "That's the biggest piece of advice I offer young physicians; you always have to plan for the unexpected."

Out of practice, Ryan forged a new path. He volunteered at the vascular clinic at the Syracuse VA Hospital; helped establish a simulation lab for laparoscopic surgery at Upstate; served briefly as director of surgical education; and taught medical students and residents. He also became an active community volunteer, serving as president of the boards of the Auburn chapter of the American Red Cross and the Cayuga County Medical Society.



In 2001, he joined the Upstate Medical Alumni Foundation Board, something he'd done in the early 1990's but had to pause due to his busy surgical schedule. He's been on the board nearly 25 years, serving as president from 2008-2010.

"The board's focus is to support Upstate medical students, which I've always felt is a tremendous mission," says Ryan. "With the increasing cost of a medical education, providing scholarship support is more important than ever. I'm happy to be part of that effort."

Now retired for many years, Ryan owns and manages a 500-acre working farm in Fleming, New York, where he hunts and leases land for farming. "I'm basically a country boy at heart," he says.

Despite the professional detour, Ryan harbors no regrets. "The bright side was that I got to spend time with my daughters and support them growing up in a way I never would have been able to do if I was a practicing surgeon," he says. "I've been fortunate in many ways."

—Renée Gearhart Levy

If you are interested in learning more about the Medical Alumni Foundation Board, please contact Paul Norcross, executive director, at norcros@upstate.edu.