

Offering Hope Through

Ted Higgins, MD '78, is elevating surgical care in Haiti by training and retaining the country's top surgical talent.

BY RÉNEE GEARHART LEVY

For more than 25 years, Kansas City surgeon Ted Higgins, MD '78, traveled to underserved areas to perform volunteer surgeries, for many years in the Dominican Republic, then Africa, then Haiti.

It was in Haiti, the poorest country in the Western hemisphere, that Higgins began dreaming of making a more lasting impact.

As the Chinese proverb says, give a poor man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach him to fish and you feed him for a lifetime. "I wanted to teach them to fish," says Dr. Higgins.

That dream is now reality. The Higgins Brothers Surgicenter for Hope, located on the campus of the Haitian Christian Mission in Fonds-Parisien, employs an all-Haitian staff of 25, including two general surgeons, one OB-GYN surgeon, two anesthesiologists, two emergency room doctors, and four nurse midwives. In 2018, the surgical center performed more than 600 operations and delivered more than 500 babies, all at a sliding fee based on what the patient can afford, which in some cases is nothing.

The surgical center is further supported by surgical teams from Kansas City that Higgins brings down four times a year. Over a five-day period, the teams will conduct an average of 60 surgeries, helping to train their Haitian colleagues on new techniques and procedures, and working with surgical residents from the General Hospital in Port au Prince.

"The goal for the surgery center was not only to help the Haitian people but to build a surgery program for Haitian doctors, bringing American surgeons down to help train them," says Higgins. "The most exciting thing about the plan has always been to have Haitian people running the surgery center. We're

there to offer support, to perhaps show them a procedure they haven't seen yet. But the goal is to work ourselves out of a job."

Three years after opening its doors, plans are underway to expand the surgical center, providing an additional 13,000 square-feet of operating rooms, a maternity ward, radiology and pathology suites, offices, a utility space for storing equipment, and sleeping quarters for residents, which is estimated to cost \$900,000. "We are well on our way to raising the funds to complete this ambitious project," says Higgins. "The current plan is to be breaking ground by the new year."

Upstate Roots

The Higgins Brothers Surgicenter is named in honor of Higgins father, Edward Higgins, MD, who was an Upstate ENT resident from 1946 to 1950 under Gordon Hoople, MD, and his uncle, Paul Higgins, MD, a general surgeon who trained under Alfred Blaylock at Johns Hopkins. Both surgeons practiced together for 38 years in Cortland, NY, in a medical office built and used by their father and grandfather. Despite the rich medical legacy, Higgins himself



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Dr. Higgins (third from right) pictured with the staff at the Higgins Brothers SurgiCenter

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had no interest in a medical career growing up. At St Lawrence University, he studied history and government.

It was the Vietnam era, which, not uncommonly, was a polarizing event between he and his father, who had served in World War II. “I always admired my dad, but we differed on the war stuff,” Higgins says.

Despite his ROTC participation in college, Higgins was spared service in Vietnam. He enjoyed the luck of a high draft number and had no post-college plans.

“It gave me time to get away from what was going on in my life and Vietnam and to ponder, ‘What do I really want to do in life?’” he says.

It was clear his future was not as a farmer. “It was too hard,” he says.

Higgins says he realized the people he admired most had been right in front of him all along—his father and his uncle, who were role models in their community for their exemplary patient care and civic involvement. “I didn’t mind working hard and I wanted to be my own boss,” he says. “I realized medicine might be the way to go after all.”

Higgins had been a three-sport athlete in college—football, skiing, and tennis—and an undistinguished C student. And he’d never taken a science course. So he enrolled in a few courses at SUNY Cortland to see how he’d do. He aced everything.

“I had a renewed passion and realized I could be a student and focus,” says Higgins, who went on to enroll as a graduate student at Syracuse University, taking the full gamut of pre-med science and working in the lab of Samuel Chan, PhD, assisting with research on mitochondria oxidative phosphorylation. He stayed in Syracuse for medical school at Upstate, which he says was a wonderful fit, then headed to Yale for residency training in general surgery.

Higgins was a second-year resident covering for a friend on the hand service when he got called to the emergency room about a patient with a lacerated extensor tendon. “I went to the library to read up on tendon repairs and then headed to the

emergency room to stitch up that tendon,” he recalls.

The patient was a young woman who’d graduated Yale the previous year, back for the weekend visiting her roommate when she broke a glass and cut her hand washing dishes. After repairing the tendon and splinting her hand, Higgins told her she could seek follow-up care in New York City, where she lived and worked, or was welcome to come back to the clinic because he was sort of interested in seeing how it healed.

She came back. After the second or third visit they made plans to have dinner and see the opera. They were married during his fourth year. Higgins and his bride, Kim, never had a honeymoon, so a couple months later, when he heard about a rotation in Haiti, he thought that might fit the bill.

The couple spent three months at Hospital Albert Schweitzer in Deschapelles, Haiti. “I saw how much a general surgeon could do with very little. You don’t need a heart-lung bypass machine. You don’t need a cell saver. The amount of good you can do for breast cancer, thyroids, hernias, hydroceles, abdominal masses, with just very little equipment was eye opening,” he says.

They were also touched by the Haitian people, their culture, and their needs, and inspired by Dr. Larimer and Gwen Mellon, who devoted their lives to transformative work in health-care, local economies, and access to water.

Little did they realize that a seed had been planted.



Dr. Higgins and Haitian surgeons assess a renal failure patient from Port Au Prince for position of dialysis access. The SurgiCenter has performed more than 150 dialysis access surgeries so far.

After graduation, he recruited a college friend to travel and bike around Ireland and England. At the end of the summer, his friend went back to the U.S. for law school. Higgins had met a farmer who needed help and ended up staying and working for four months in the little town of Hacketstown, in the Wicklow Mountains, south of Dublin. He worked on the farm, played Gaelic football, and became part of the community, developing friendships that have lasted a lifetime.



A Call to Action

Higgins became board certified in both general surgery and vascular surgery. The couple settled in his wife's hometown of Kansas City, where she would have family support raising their young family while he developed his busy surgical practice.

In 1992, Higgins began annual trips to the Dominican Republic through their church, where teams provided health-care to sugar cane cutters and their families. Seeing surgical needs of all kinds, he began operating in a borrowed clinic. "I started off for probably 10 years doing just basic general surgery—hernias, hydroceles, abdominal masses, breast, thyroids, anything that needed to come off," he recalls. "Over time, some of the Dominican surgeons would want to come by and see what I was doing.

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Subsequently, Higgins brought a couple of the surgeons to Kansas City to teach them how to perform laparoscopic surgery and take that back with them. Later, he introduced them to dialysis access surgery because they had gotten some dialysis machines.

That continued for 20 years. But in 2010, Haiti was devastated

by a major earthquake. The Higgins' daughter Maggie, then a pre-medical student, was there doing relief work and Higgins, who was on his way to volunteer in Africa, asked if she needed help. "Dad, there's just no operating rooms here for you to use," she told him.

But Higgins happened to have a Haitian-American nurse practitioner working in his practice. She told him she thought she could find him a place to work. "It won't be much, just a delivery room, but I think you can make it work," she told him.

After returning from Africa, Higgins assembled a volunteer surgical team and headed to Haiti in November 2010. "The country was devastated. It was a real mess," he recalls.

Higgins was able to get an anesthetic machine, find an anesthesiologist, and worked out of the tiny cinderblock baby-delivery building on the campus of the Haitian Christian Mis-

Dr. Higgins assists general surgeon McKendy Termelus, MD, in an inguinal hernia repair. According to Higgins, the Haitian hernias are generally much larger than hernias seen in the United States and are often present for a long time because patients lack the resources for surgical repair.



Nurse midwives at the SurgiCenter deliver more than 500 babies a year, including a set of quadruplets last year.

sion in Fonds-Parisien, an isolated village in eastern Haiti approximately eight miles from the Haiti/Dominican border. “We had to move the operating room table to get the gurney in to move the patient. That’s how small it was.”

Over the next six years, he performed more than 500 sometimes life-saving surgeries. But over time, he recognized that the needs of the people far surpassed what could be accomplished in that dated under-sized facility. He wanted to build a bigger space.

After unsuccessful attempts at getting financial support for the project in Haiti, Higgins decided he was tired of waiting and funded the project himself, spending some \$500,000 of his own money to build the Higgins Brothers Surgicenter for Hope on the campus of the Haitian Christian Mission. “My agreement with the founder was that if I built this center there, it was for everybody in Haiti. We treat everybody, regardless of ability to pay,” he says.

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As in many developing countries, the common practice in Haiti if someone needs surgery is to visit the surgeon, who will tell the patient the cost and give him or her a list of supplies to bring—suture, bandages, etc. If you don’t have money, tough luck.

Using his “teaching a man to fish” philosophy, Higgins hired a Haitian crew to build the facility. “They have no mechanical equipment. Everything was done by hand—digging the trenches for foundations, constructing the building. It took over a year,”

he says. “And at the dedication, those workers were there in coat and tie as proud as can be.”

Building for the Future

The Higgins Brothers Surgicenter opened its doors on December 10, 2016. It is the only trauma/surgical care clinic offering 24-hour service in the area and

includes a surgical emergency room, consultation rooms, two major operating rooms, and one minor operating room, a large recovery room, and a maternity ward renovated from the original building. The facility offers emergency care, obstetrical and gynecologic, vascular, and urologic surgeries, as well as hernia and hydrocele repairs, and has a team of nurse midwives that assist with up to 500 births per year.

Last August, a 22-year-old woman walked down from the hills in labor and gave birth to quadruplets. “No pre-op evaluation, no epidural, no episiotomy;

nothing. Just came in and delivered four kids,” says Higgins. “They were two pounds each. We sent them to a neonatal unit in Port au Prince.”

In October, when the surgical center held a celebration honoring its Haitian staff, the quadruplets came for a visit. “They’re doing great,” he says. Higgins says the surgical skill of the staff is top notch, hand picked by him after working with them throughout their medical training. “Many surgeons from Haiti get trained and then leave and go to the United States because they can make more money,” he says. “But the doctors we have are committed to helping their own people, and they’re making a huge difference. The medical needs of the country don’t stop when the team from the U.S. leaves.”

Nonetheless, resources are limited. Most medical supplies are donated, however, getting containers transported to Haiti and through customs is a continual challenge. “Things are rel-

ative,” Higgins says. “We have to sometimes re-use sterile gowns. If you don’t have something you need, you make it work. I’ve been in cases where we’ve run out of suture, the Bovie doesn’t work, or lights go out. What do you do? Well, you get your flashlights out, or you get your cell phone app out—which is a great light by the way. You work with what you have.”

Higgins’ major focus now is on raising funds—for operating expenses, namely salaries for the Haitian staff, as well as new facilities, and scholarships for talented young Haitian students to become nurses, doctors, and medical technicians. “We need to ensure the quality of care at the facility will be sustainable,” he says.

Higgins continues to maintain his full-time surgical practice in Kansas City, where he is regularly listed among “best doctors” in the city. He volunteers at the Kansas City Free Clinic and established a fund to support multiple sclerosis

research in honor of a colleague who suffered from the affliction. That fund has grown into the third largest private fund for MS research in the United States and spawned a research foundation sponsoring young researchers working on finding a cure for the disease.

Like his father and uncle before him, Higgins is known in his community as a role model to medical students, physicians, and others for his surgical skill, empathetic patient care, and civic commitment. But it’s the Higgins Brothers Surgicenter in Haiti that has his heart.

“The bottom line of why I do this—its about the Haitian people,” he says. “They don’t have options and yet they survive in the best way they can, which is remarkable,” he says. “Just like you and me, they want the best for their children. Hopefully, we will change the story there.” ■

For more information, visit Higginsbrotherssurgicenter.org.

By elevating the standard of medical care, the Higgins Brothers Surgicenter aims to raise the quality of life for Haitian citizens in the area.

