

THE LAST STITCH

HE HELPED BUILD A HOUSE OF MEDICINE - LITERALLY

It's often been said that everyone deserves a second chance, though some might argue that such a sequela is dictated by the egregiousness of the "prequela." Luckily for 1960s "hodcarrier" and current ASPS member Karl Wustrack, MD, who errantly dumped a fresh batch of mortar, or mud, on his first day on the job at a construction site, his coworkers were an understanding bunch.

"The bricklayers were yelling for me to get some 'mud' to them on the second floor of this house we were building," explains Dr. Wustrack, West Linn, Ore. "So I mixed a batch, got it into a wheelbarrow and pushed it up a long, wooden plank to the house. I nearly made it across the plank when the thing tilted over - and I dumped the whole batch of 'mud' into the ditch that had been dug around the periphery of the foundation. Then I had to mix another batch; as I did that all the guys were just yelling at me."



Karl Wustrack, MD, stands outside a medical center he helped build.

Dr. Wustrack became a hodcarrier in the early 1960s after learning that a fellow churchgoer and other friends had caught-on with a local contractor. Hodcarriers are nearly synonymous with construction laborers, but with the particular function of carrying bricks via the "hod" - a sling that pinches together a load of 10 bricks, side-by-side - and of mixing and delivering mortar. Familiar versions of the hod were constructed in such a manner that they appeared similar to a large, inverted birdhouse roof fastened to the top of a 4-foot pole.

He enjoyed summer work in Portland and eastern Oregon during five summers, until another near-miss nudged him back to medical school - this time, permanently. "We were building Portland's Providence Medical Center, which required a seven-floor scaffolding network that looked like a big Erector set," he recalls. "To walk on a 'floor,' I'd move a series of planks beyond one another," similar to a cartoon where a character throws rails in front of a moving train to keep it on track. "I didn't get one down properly, and when I stepped on the plank, it teeter-tottered - and I fell onto another plank. The first plank slipped through and down, landing at the bottom; it sounded like a bomb went off. I'm holding on to the plank seven floors up and thinking: 'Maybe it's time to go back to medical school.'"

It could be dangerous work, he acknowledges - but the danger often depended upon who was doing what, and with which material. "I was moving a wheelbarrow filled with bricks up toward the higher floors of one building, when its front wheel pushed down between the planks, and the thing toppled," he says. "All the bricks went pinballing down the side. If someone had been standing under that, it would've been all over for them."

Today, rather than causing damage on construction sites, Dr. Wustrack repairs it on surgical sites - while also using his skills to improve the appearances of those seeking aesthetic enhancement. In fact, Dr. Wustrack has performed cosmetic plastic surgery on at least one former co-worker from his hodcarrier days - as well as on several relatives and friends of others. "Many of us have kept in touch," he says. "I removed skin cancer from one of my old bosses." He's also received referrals for a facelift and breast augmentations from his old crew. "It's all worked out," he says.

Hodcarrying was a great experience, he says - hard work but also rewarding, in terms of decent pay for the time, the development of dormant muscles and the unlikely friendships he made. "I'd be in eastern Oregon for whole summers," he fondly recalls. "At night we'd all go out to some cowboy bar. It was a ball. That was a great group of guys." [PSN](#)

10 YEARS AGO IN PSN...

It was only a decade ago that a procedure with a long history behind it exploded into the national consciousness: abdominoplasty after massive weight loss. Celebrity bariatric surgery patients such as TV's *Al Roker* and *Carnie Wilson* helped bring the procedure into the open, which was highlighted in an article titled "Obesity surgery spawns 'new frontier' for plastic surgery," published in the July 2003 issue of PSN:

"Now I see four to six (patients) per week, and my partner sees two to three per week - that's five to 10 new patients per week. This is absolutely the new frontier of plastic surgery."



- Al Aly, MD
Iowa City, Iowa [PSN](#)

SURGEON SPOTLIGHT

Editor's note: The bulk of PSN's pages are devoted to specific elements of our mission statement - to keep members informed of the social, political and economic trends and educational opportunities that affect the specialty of plastic surgery.

PSN is pleased to take liberties with the "social" aspect of its mission statement by presenting a good-natured look at the lives of notable members who we believe are making significant contributions to the specialty.



Reza Mirali (Mirali akbari), MD

IN THIS ISSUE, we present to you **Reza Mirali (Mirali akbari), MD, Annandale, Va.**, an assistant professor (clinical) of plastic surgery at Georgetown University Medical Center, Washington, D.C., and assistant professor (clinical) of surgery at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) School of Medicine, Inova. He completed his general surgery residency at East Carolina University, Greenville, N.C., and his plastic surgery residency at Penn State College of Medicine, Hershey, Pa. A member of the ASPS Curriculum Development Committee, Dr. Mirali divides his time between his practice, VCU and his family - wife and dermatologist Shabnam Shahabadi, MD (with whom he shares a practice); daughter, Darya, 4; and his son, Sina, 1. Dr. Mirali carved time out of his day to answer the following questions for PSN:

If I had to start my career over, I would... Pursue the same path; perhaps start my focus on plastic surgery in medical school rather than surgery residency.

The greatest influence on my decision to become a Plastic Surgeon was... The plastic surgery staff at my general surgery residency: Bill Wooden, MD, and Janice Lalikos, MD, at East Carolina University. They showed me the best of - and embodied the best of - the specialty.

Younger surgeons today... Should treasure, be proud of and practice all that you have learned in training. The financial rewards will follow.

The best thing about being a Plastic Surgeon is... The variety: extremity, head and neck or breast reconstruction, perforator flaps, free flaps, chimeric flaps, skin cancer puzzles, pressure ulcer-wound reconstruction. That keeps me on my toes all the time and challenges me every day.

The worst thing about being a Plastic Surgeon is... The public misconception that a small portion of our training defines our specialty.

The best thing I ever purchased for my office was... A multi-page rapid scanner. Particularly now in the age of EMR, everything gets scanned and saved! I only wish the documents came in digital format to begin with.

The worst thing I ever purchased for my office was... A toaster. I wished I actually had the time to use it. Worse yet, my staff do not have time to use it, either. On the positive side, it was not a high-ticket item.

I couldn't operate without my... Music. (I'm on a mix all the time. It can include Cold Play, Lady Antebellum, Metallica, Ishtar, Sting, Shaggy, Kiosk, Adele, Sina Hejazi, Angelique Kidjo, Steely Dan, Yasmin Levy...) The mix has become popular with some of the O.R. staff.

The last book I read was... *Life of Pi*. One can take away many lessons from it; I appreciated the open acceptance and criticism of all philosophies.

My all-time favorite movie is... *History of the World*, a 1981 Mel Brooks film. I love comedy, and this is a rare movie I've seen more than once - more like four or five times. Talk about an open approach to all philosophies!

I seriously collect... Magnets from every town or country we've gone to. Now I just have to find a large enough surface to put them on (the fridge door isn't magnetic).

The biggest surprise I ever had in the O.R. was... A massive bladder prolapse. I'd never seen one before and didn't know what it was. I was humbled by a nurse to find out.

The best vacation I ever took was... To Italy. The mountains, the countryside, the beaches, the history, the food, the wine...

The best part of next weekend will be... Time with my wife, daughter (4-1/2) and son (1-1/2). It can be anything, really - not too picky on the venue here.

The words I try to live by are... What will be my legacy as a citizen, a family man and a professional - a plastic surgeon? [PSN](#)



Dr. Mirali, his wife, Shabnam Shahabadi, MD, and their daughter, Darya, then age 3, swim with a dolphin at the Atlantis Resort in the Bahamas in August 2012.