Historical perspectives of The American Association for Thoracic Surgery: Irving L. Kron

Kenan W. Yount, MD, MBA, and Christine L. Lau, MD, MBA, for the American Association for Thoracic Surgery Centennial Committee

“Are you kidding?” remarked Dr Paul Ebert, 68th president of The American Association for Thoracic Surgery (AATS), to a young Dr Kron. Being the junior of the only 2 cardiothoracic surgeons at the University of Virginia (UVA), Dr Kron had unfortunately been scheduled to assume call responsibilities for the weekend of the AATS Annual Meeting, during which he was to be inducted as a new member. “This is the most important organization you will ever join!” exclaimed Dr Ebert. Heeding this advice, Dr Kron arrived in Los Angeles 8 hours later, was promptly introduced to the organization, and then returned to Virginia that evening on a red-eye to resume his call duties. Dr Ebert’s advice proved to be true, as Dr Kron later served on the organization’s council for nearly a decade and ultimately became its 91st president in 2010.

Irving Louis Kron (Figure 1) was born in 1950 to David and Bella Kron, both immigrants to Bradley Beach, New Jersey, from Poland. He was 1 of 3 children, including a brother who became a cardiologist and a sister who became an accountant. Molded by his father’s strong work ethic as a factory foreman, Dr Kron received his undergraduate degree in 1971 from the University of Pennsylvania. Unlike many students entering a career in medicine at that time, his decision to become a physician was far from inevitable; in fact, no one among his family or their friends was a physician. Attending medical school was a last minute decision rooted in his interest in behavioral biology and the sense of purpose he hoped to receive in helping others.

Once in medical school, he set his sights on becoming a pediatrician; however, his last rotation before applying to residency was pediatric surgery, a notoriously difficult rotation that few of his peers dared to elect. Observing his mentors’ ability to serve as both doctors and surgeons motivated him to reconsider his career choice. He graduated from the Medical College of Wisconsin in 1975 and entered general surgery residency at Maine Medical Center, preparing to become a rural surgeon. During his general surgery

FIGURE 1. Irving L. Kron, MD.

residency, Dr Kron was drawn to thoracic and cardiovascular surgery and completed his training at UVA in 1982. Charlottesville was the ultimate draw to him: a residency known for its teaching and the autonomy of its trainees, a university known for its academic culture, and a stunning setting at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains to complement his passion for the outdoors.

Dr Kron arrived at UVA for the tail end of the surgical career of Dr William “Harry” Muller, who was trained by Dr Alfred Blalock (30th AATS President) at Johns Hopkins. Dr Muller was Chief of Surgery. As a graduate of the Citadel, he was both an imposing but highly respected figure at UVA, who stressed to Dr Kron the importance of attention to detail and repetition during his training. Dr Kron described, “When Dr Muller walked into the room, he had a way of ensuring that things unfolded in exactly the right manner. Everyone from the cardiac fellow to the scrub tech knew exactly what he expected of them.” (K.W.Y., personal communication, December 2013). Dr Kron was fortunate enough to scrub with Dr Muller during his last few cases and goes on to recall, “Every day, he would find a new technical detail to harp on. I would go home and practice for hours thereafter to improve. Then one day toward the end of my fellowship, the harping stopped. I knew I had finally made it.” (K.W.Y., personal communication, December 2013). Dr Muller was dedicated to his training program and had a profound faith in his trainees, attributes that Dr Kron carries on to this day.

Dr Stan Nolan served as Dr Kron’s second mentor in cardiothoracic surgery. Dr Kron described Dr Nolan as

From the Division of Thoracic and Cardiovascular Surgery, University of Virginia Health System, Charlottesville, Va.

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Address for reprints: Kenan W. Yount, MD, MBA, Division of Thoracic and Cardiovascular Surgery, University of Virginia Health System, PO Box 800679, Charlottesville, VA 22908 (E-mail: kenan@virginia.edu).

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the consummate “surgical scientist,” a true student of the scientific method who stressed to his trainees the importance of understanding the underlying pathophysiology to perform the correct operation. When Dr Kron was a fellow, Dr Nolan met weekly with his trainees in the operating room lounge to discuss heart disease and tell old tales of cardiac surgery. Dr Kron later fashioned his own Saturday morning teaching session with his fellows, known to them as “Biscuits,” after Dr Nolan’s tradition.

Dr R. Scott Jones, who had just recently been promoted to Chair of Surgery, hired Dr Kron after his fellowship, and Dr Kron has remained on faculty at UVA ever since. Dr Kron’s negotiation with Dr Jones was simple. They did not even discuss a starting salary. Academic surgeons were not always known for their clinical productivity, but Dr Kron believed that staying sharp required him to be a workhorse. He wanted to be a clinically productive and versatile surgeon with the ability to do everything: congenital cardiac surgery, adult cardiac surgery, vascular surgery, and run a laboratory. From his time in Maine, he had learned a great deal on cultivating relationships with local and regional referring providers. Reflecting back on his ambition, Dr Kron admitted, “In reality, at the time I knew very little about how to do any of those things successfully.” (K.W.Y., personal communication, December 2013).

Dr Kron’s dedication to surgical training has garnered him numerous teaching awards, including the Warren Teaching Award (1982), the Shipley Award from the Southern Surgical Association (1989), 2 Teacher of the Year Awards from UVA (1988, 2000), and the William “Billy” Gitchell Award (2001). He was appointed Chief in Vascular Surgery and Associate Medical Director of the Thoracic Cardiovascular Postoperative Unit in 1989. He was then promoted to Chief of the Division of Thoracic and Cardiovascular Surgery in 1993 and served as Vice Chairman of the Department of Surgery in 1999. In 2002, he was appointed Chair of the Department of Surgery and the S. Hurt Watts Professor in Surgery. He has delivered more than 250 presentation at national meetings, published more than 350 peer-reviewed articles, and received more than 40 research grants all while maintaining an active family life, outdoor hobbies, a demanding clinical schedule, and one of the most productive basic surgical science laboratories in the country.

Dr Kron’s greatest professional passion is in his role as Program Director at UVA. Dr Kron drew inspiration from Stanford’s Norman Shumway, who lamented during his 1967 AATS Presidential Address that the most difficult challenge in cardiac surgery is “getting a chance to do it.”¹ Dr Kron’s goal was “to build on and further develop a program that actually taught residents how to operate.”² In his view, the pressures of managed care and focus on surgical outcomes sparked considerable interest into researching better ways of using simulation and didactic teaching

FIGURE 2. Dr Kron with his wife, Shelia, sharing their passion for fishing and the outdoors.

(ie, supplements to teaching surgery). “As a profession we have that part down.” Dr Kron, continued, “What we have needed to do is teach the *surgery* part of cardiac surgery. At UVA, I wanted to create the best program that taught residents how to master an operation.”² Dr Kron resolved never to indulge the type of residency in which operations were performed mostly by attending surgeons; in fact, during his AATS presidential address, Dr Kron firmly laid down the gauntlet that no attending surgeon should be allowed to perform an operation if he or she cannot properly teach the operation. Dr Kron has made no secret that he, like Dr Muller, has the highest professional and personal regard for cardiothoracic surgeons who graduated from his program. Beyond training residents in the technical aspects of cardiac surgery, Dr Kron believes that mentors should seek out employment opportunities for their residents. He also strongly believes that mentors should be available for their residents in their personal lives: “Cardiac surgery is a lifetime obsession, but we must also teach residents that there is more to life than this. Teaching this aspect of humanity will make us better physicians and surgeons.”²

In addition to his wife, Shelia (Figure 2), Dr Kron presently has a family of 4 children: Adam, a graduate of the Harvard School of Law and currently an environmental attorney in Washington, DC; Jason, a healthcare consultant who graduated from Vanderbilt’s School of Business; Kristen, who shares his passion of teaching and has dedicated her life to being a grade school teacher; and Hayden, who is still in high school and is a sports enthusiast like his father. Unfortunately, Dr Kron’s late son, Brian, passed away unexpectedly during the summer of his tenure as President of the AATS. Dr Kron and Brian shared a mutual love of fly fishing, and they used this pastime to bond and talk about life. Dr Kron set aside time for Brian before he was to return to Colorado for his upcoming semester. He canceled all of his operations for the day because he thought that it was so important to spend time with his family. Brian

Kron spent the day before he passed wearing his Green Bay Packers hat and fishing with his father. Dr Kron later was extremely thankful he had prioritized his family because without the memory of their last trip together etched in his mind, his loss would have been all the more painful. Soon after Brian's passing, a former fellow wrote to Dr Kron: "Losing a son is a horrible thing. I am sure I have no idea of the true meaning, but I want to say you have many surgical sons and daughters that you have prepared well and sent out into the world."² Paralleling this to his own life lessons, Dr Kron concluded his AATS presidential address:

We must remember that our residents are our sons and daughters. We must teach surgical mentors the proper side of the table to stand on and how to let their egos stand down in pursuit of the greater good...No resident should complete a program incompetent to perform surgery. They are our surgical children and we must cherish them all.²

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