

# My Life as a Surgeon: Steven Evans, MD

September 2021

## Questions:

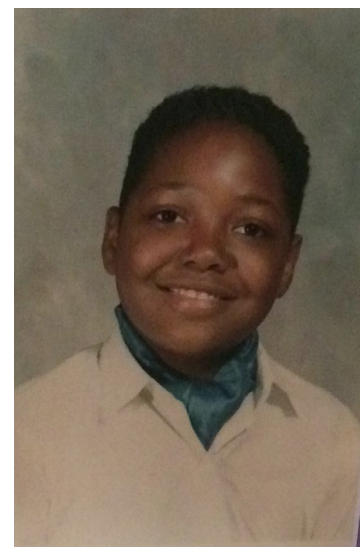
### 1. Growing up

I grew up in the Redfern Housing Projects of New York City. My Mom and Dad, Pinkie and Marion Evans, migrated to the north from the segregated south in search of a better life and to be free of the Jim Crow laws that constrained them in Crawfordville, Georgia. Their highest level of formal education was the third and sixth grade, respectively. My great, great grandfather was a slave, Pa Golden Stewart.

We were poor, but I never knew that. My parents worked tirelessly to keep food on the table and clothes on the backs of all six of children. Dad worked for the Long Island Railroad and laid tracks for a living, working in all types of weather conditions. Mom did “day work” cleaning the homes of White wealthy clients. She also ran her own nursery and childcare business from our three-bedroom apartment, 7am-7pm, Monday through Friday.

### 2. Why did you become a doctor?

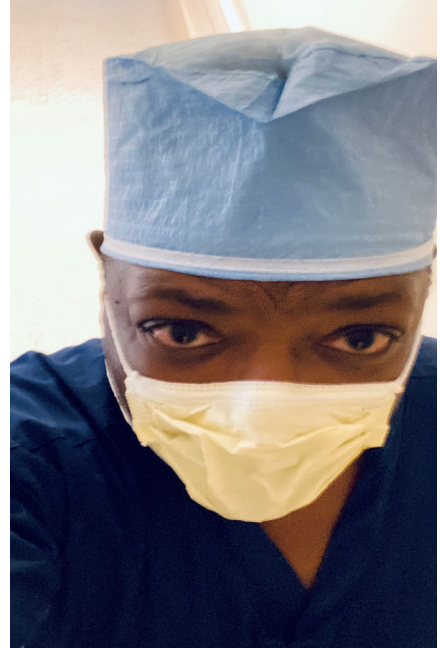
When I was 15 years old, my summer job was in the library at St. Joseph’s Hospital, Far Rockaway, NY. I enjoyed reading all the anatomy books in the library. As it turns out, there was a nursing strike at that time, which gave me the opportunity to work in the Emergency Room. That experience cinched it for me. The ER was an exciting place. Despite the frenetic pace and activity, all the doctors seemed to enjoy what they were doing. I was hooked.



### **3. Why did you become a surgeon?**

Looking back over my time at Columbia University as President of the Charles Drew Premedical Society, I had the great fortune of meeting several Black surgeons, Dr. Kenneth Forde and Dr. Harold Freeman from Columbia Presbyterian Hospital and Harlem Hospital. These surgeons were early pioneers in cancer surgery and advocates for the early detection and prevention of colon and breast cancer.

To this day, these doctors as well as others have influenced my practice of surgery and community outreach advancing the benefits of screening and early detection of breast and colon cancer.



### **4. When did you decide to become a surgeon? Did you have an epiphany? What was it?**

During my Senior year at the George Washington School of Medicine and Health Sciences, I did an Acting Intern Clerkship the NIH/NCI Surgery Branch. While there, I worked with Howard Edington, MD, a graduate of this program who inspired me to commit to surgery and to care for cancer patients as a career. At the time, Dr. Steven Rosenberg, Chairman, was working on novel therapies for sarcoma, which included surgical resection and immunotherapy.

My pivotal moment came when a patient who was to undergo a hemipelvectomy for a pelvic sarcoma shared these words: “Thank you. I know that this treatment may not save my life, but I see the sacrifice you make each day rounding early and leaving late to help all of us.”

Before that time, I did not recall any former patient making such efforts to say thank you.

**5. Did you develop a clear vision/mission for your surgical career? When was it?**

After my clerkship experience at the NIH/NCI Branch of Surgery, I spoke to L. Thompson Bowles, MD, PhD, who was at that time Vice President of Medical Affairs, Executive Dean, and Professor of Surgery at George Washington University Medical Center. I was not sure that I had what it takes to compete and secure a spot in a surgery program, even though I had received honors on that rotation. The advice he gave me left a lasting impression.

“Take a look in the mirror. Who is staring back at you? No one but you can stop you from becoming a surgeon!” His words and *Joshua 1:9*, “be strong and courageous, do not be afraid; for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go,” has sustained me along my circuitous path.

With that in mind, how could I say anything but “YES” to a call from Dr. Henry T. Bahnson, Chairman of the Department of Surgery at the University of Pittsburgh, asking me to accept a preliminary spot in their surgery residency program. Little did I realize at the time that, in saying yes, I and Robert S.D. Higgins, MD, now Director of the Department of Surgery at Johns Hopkins, would be the first African American men to be accepted to the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine Department of Surgery Residency Program.

That was 1985 and I am still here, now Clinical Professor of Surgery in the Division of Surgical Oncology and Director of Community Engagement for the University of Pittsburgh/UPMC Department of Surgery.

**6. Who were your mentors? In what way for each?**

After completing my surgery training, I began a pediatric surgery fellowship at Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh with aspirations of becoming a pediatric surgical oncologist. My mentor Sam D. Smith, MD had left Pittsburgh to start a pediatric surgical program in his hometown of Little Rock, Arkansas. What I admired most about Sam was his calm demeanor. Even when all hell was breaking loose, his attention to detail and his love for family never wavered. I resigned from my position as a fellow at Children’s Hospital, as I could not weather the daily microaggressions, mental abuse, and demonstrative lack of investment in my development as a pediatric surgeon.

Dr. Richard L. Simmons, my department's Chairman at the time, was resolute in support of my decision to resign and led the way to my future success. Dr. Simmons will offer wise counsel to anyone who asks. His quiet strength and leadership are what I aim to emulate.

After that experience, I joined Robert F. Quinlin, MD and Leonard E. Evans, MD, graduates of The UPMC Surgery Residency Program, in their community practice of General Surgery. Their contribution to my growth and development as a surgeon and community leader is immeasurable. Although they are both retired now, we are partners for life.

### **7. Has your career been as envisioned/expected?**

My career in surgery has taken me to places I will cherish forever: Gallup Indian Medical Center as a Lieutenant Commander in Surgery, USPHS, Tenwek Hospital, Kenya as a Visiting Professor of Surgery, and New Testament Mission, Haiti as a volunteer missionary.

### **8. Expected and unexpected challenges**

Balancing a career in surgery is expected to be challenging. What I did not expect is the full impact it takes on the ones you love most: my wife and children. My wife, Cynthia Duarte, MD, suffered from multiple sclerosis for 15 years and later colon cancer, which took her life at a young age. I learned to juggle many hats during my career while being a husband, father of three beautiful children, and a surgeon.



### **9. Tell us about a low point as a surgeon that led to a life lesson.**

The loss of a patient is never easy, especially when it happens after an operation you have performed or from a technical mistake you have made. It is easy to be overcome by depression in these moments and question your skill and more. Never allow your identity to be tied to a negative experience - "forgive yourself."

Keep moving forward and look ahead with renewed hope, faith, and confidence from lessons learned.

**10. What has been the biggest reward(s) in your career?**

One of the greatest rewards in my career has been working with like-minded colleagues who aim to build health equity for all and are committed to finding creative ways to deliver quality care to the poor and uninsured.

The pandemic has shined a light on disparities that have always existed for Blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans, and Asian people in our country. One of my proudest moments this year was demonstrating what it means to be a leader and socially responsible surgeon by partnering with faith-based organizations and Federally Qualified Health Centers administering life “one shot at a time” in our COVID-19 vaccine clinics with Drs. Tim Billiar, Mia Diego, Matthew Rosengart ,and others. We must continue to invest in these communities, building bridges of trust.



**11. What would you do differently?**

I have learned to value all the experiences that have come my way in life, even those that were not easy to bear. I am look forward to a future that is even better than my past.

**12. Of what accomplishment are you most proud/gratified in your career?**

In October 2020 I was awarded The Leo Criepp, MD Excellence in Patient Care Award from UPMC Hillman Cancer Center and in October 2014, the Physician of the Year Award from Gateway Medical Society.

The bond and lasting relationships I form with my patients and their families as they journey through breast and colon cancer is what I treasure most. These are the greatest rewards of my career.

**13. What advice do you have for those entering a career in surgery?**

“No one cares how much you know until they know how much you care.” As a surgeon, you are a trusted leader, mentor, and teacher. Never be afraid to take the road less travelled. Why? The adventure and rewards are worth it! Connect to your purpose! Don’t let anyone turn you around!