FAMILY INFLUENCE STRETCHES FROM BERLIN TO CLEVELAND

Although having a family member in medicine has provided a starting point for many plastic surgeons' journey into the specialty, few can say that influence reaches back to the 1800s and one of the first plastic surgeons in Germany. Kevin Dieffenbach, MD, Aiea, Hawaii, can make that claim. German officials in 1990 invited Dr. Dieffenbach and his uncle, Ken Dieffenbach, MD – a New Orleans-based plastic surgeon – to Berlin to celebrate the 200th birthday of Johann Friedrich Dieffenbach, MD, who once taught Harvard surgeon Jonathan Mason Warren, MD, the "Indian Forehead Flap for Nasal Reconstruction." In turn, Dr. Warren taught ether anesthesia to Dr. Dieffenbach, which would ultimately lead to its widespread use across Europe.

"There was a portrait of Johann in Berlin that people asked me to stand near for photos," Dr. Dieffenbach says. "They felt there was a physical resemblance – which was a stretch but still humbling. But closer to the present day, my uncle opened the pathway for me; he's the most-direct reason I'm a plastic surgeon."

Familial influence also helped Dr. Dieffenbach develop carpentry and construction skills, as his mid-1800s American ancestors were pipe organ builders, with several functioning models still existing in Pennsylvania churches and museums. His great-grandfather and grandfather specialized in building restoration, with his father, an industrial engineer, handing down some of those skills to his son. As a young teenager, his first major projects with his father included building a garage, Soap Box Derby cars and installing a wood-burning stove in the family home in Homer, N.Y.

Dr. Dieffenbach and his father, Wayne, watch as his son, Jakob, puts his cutting skills to work while building a Pinewood Derby car for an upcoming competition.

Dr. Dieffenbach became more independent as he got older – at one point working for a father's friend who needed help with finishing work on a house. "I spent hours cutting and sanding, painting and putting molding around the doors and on the ceilings," he recalls. "Then I spent one summer at camp where the director chose me to work in his office. I installed a window and did other projects, and I actually had an assistant. I was 16 then, so that was kind of neat. During another summer, I framed houses."

Dr. Dieffenbach parlayed his construction skills into extra money with a fellow graduate at the University of Rochester, where they bought a beat-up van and advertised themselves as the "College Grad Painters." "Most were mundane tasks: painting rooms, minor plumbing repairs, fixing loose doors and things of that nature," he recalls. "We did spend a lot of time working on a house a professor was trying to sell – and he was very generous in his pay."

He later revived the project as the "House Doctors" by getting together with a couple of other cash-strapped medical students at Case Western Reserve University. Dr. Dieffenbach took pride in finishing every job at the highest possible level, but one House Doctors job negated that approach. "While we were doing other work, the owners told us about a raccoon that had gotten into their back-porch ceiling, where it made a ruckus at night," he recalls. "It wasn't a big opening, but we poked around up there – and we were surprised by the hissing, lunging and aggressiveness that confronted us; it was winter, and she was in there with her babies," Dr. Dieffenbach recalls. "We decided that if we tried to go in after them, we'd not fare very well. At that point, it wasn't about the money – it was about not getting seriously mauled."

All ended well after animal control arrived and rescued the furry family, although the House Doctors left a little rattled. "We weren't physically injured," Dr. Dieffenbach says with a laugh, "but we were emotionally scarred." **PSN**