

DR. WHO

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

DR. THOMAS HIGGINS

AUTHOR Kathryn Vance



Learning, innovating and understanding the root cause is what keeps Dr. Thomas Higgins going. A strong desire to know more is what sparked his interest in medicine from a young age and is what still propels him forward to this day.

“My interest in medicine was twofold. I love the challenges and I liked to help people,” he said. “I’ve also always been interested in research, and there’s all kinds of discoveries you can make in medicine. We’re always looking for something new.”

As a native Louisvillian, Dr. Higgins attended Jeffersontown High School and then went on to Bellarmine University for undergrad where he studied chemistry as a pre-med student. Choosing to stay close to home, he enrolled at the University of Louisville School of Medicine and pursued both his MD as well as a Master of Public Health degree with concentrations in epidemiology and research.

Along the way, he found his interest in ENT and upon finishing both degrees in 2006, the time came for residency. He ended up at Eastern Virginia Medical School in Norfolk, Virginia where he would spend the next five years.

“Eastern Virginia had, and continues to have, a phenomenal program in ENT. They have all the subspecialties within ENT as well, so I could train on not only general ENT but also the complex ENT cases.”

While he was there, Dr. Joe Han, a highly respected physician in both clinical and research settings, became the Director of Rhinology at Eastern Virginia.

“It was a unique opportunity because he had just started and I got a lot of exposure to him, which I was so fortunate to have. We

became really good colleagues and friends, and we still interact all the time today.”

This training and exposure to strong mentors led Dr. Higgins to realize he wanted to pursue some of those complex conditions, and he started a fellowship in rhinology and skull base in 2011. With the small nature of the rhinology community, his mentors and teachers were instrumental in directing him toward Johns Hopkins University, where he completed his fellowship.

After a year in Baltimore, he knew it was time to head home, a mutual decision with his wife Ashley. Also a Louisville native, the two met through mutual friends on the cross country team while students at Bellarmine. They got married while in medical school, and she stuck with him through training across the country, with her only stipulation being that they return home as their final stop.

Upon returning to the Bluegrass state in the summer of 2012, he was the first ENT in Kentucky with advanced fellowship training in rhinology.

“I reached out to ENTs to tell them what I offered and to help them understand what I could help them with,” he said. “I talked to them and a lot of them didn’t know how I could help at the time, but I gave them my cell phone number and told them to call if they needed me. Sure enough, I started getting calls.”

He wanted to be thought of as the local alternative to notable higher institutions across the country like Mayo Clinic, Vanderbilt or Cleveland Clinic. “I wanted to serve as a chance to treat the patients locally, so they didn’t have to go further away for treatment.”

This new territory brought its own set of challenges, though. With no one else at the time doing what he was doing, it was often hard to

get ORs equipped with the instruments he needed for procedures.

“It made it tough. Being the new person, I had to be able to explain what I did, what I needed and what I was trying to accomplish.”

Dr. Higgins joined Kentuckiana ENT right away when he moved back and hasn't looked back since. He splits his time between clinic and surgery and of course, the administrative duties. His surgeries are typically out of the Surgecenter of Louisville and Norton Brownsboro Hospital, doing a variety of procedures from sinus surgery to tumor removals.

Recently, Kentuckiana ENT has grown and become a part of ENT Care Centers, of which Dr. Higgins is President and Chairman of the Board.

“It's a collaboration of four ENT groups and 12 physicians in Louisville and Indiana. Each entity will retain its name, but they are now a division of ENT Care Centers.”

Because of his lifelong interest in research, his current practice has developed a clinical research program. Dr. Higgins serves as the Vice President and Clinical Research Medical Director. They do clinical trials and research, some in collaboration with the UofL

School of Medicine and other institutions. They also participate in randomized controlled trials in different phases of various ENT conditions such as sinusitis, hearing loss and tinnitus.

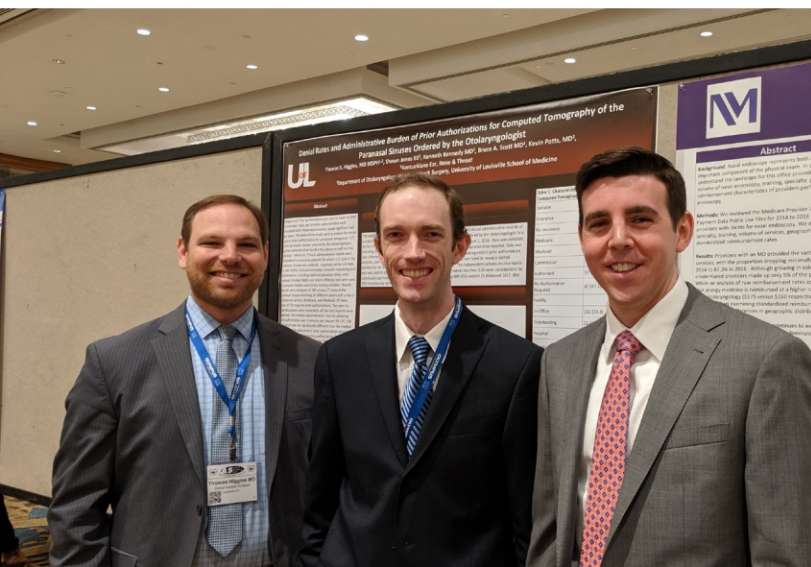
“Innovation and research are so important. As I've gone through life, I've always asked how I can improve myself or what I don't know. If there's something I don't know, I try to find the answer. That's what leads me to the research.”

In conjunction with research is his role as Clinical Associate Professor in the Department of Otolaryngology at UofL School of Medicine, allowing students to train alongside him and participate in ongoing research efforts.

He currently serves on the Greater Louisville Medical Society Board of Governors as Treasurer and is the Chair of the Policy & Advocacy Committee. Organized medicine is something he's passionate about, largely because of the collaboration it allows between specialties.

Within the last few years, Dr. Higgins has worked with a group of ENTs and allergists from around the country to develop a non-profit organization called the Snot Force Alliance. “Yes, you heard

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that right,” he laughed. He serves as President, and the organization aims to create a network of specialists across different specialties to learn and collaborate on sinus, allergy and airway conditions. The more than 500 members across the country of course do research, but they also discuss complex conditions and different methods for diagnosis and treatment.

“I saw a huge gap in the way specialists treat the same condition. And it’s due to a lack of knowledge of how certain doctors would treat certain things. We’re expanding that to a venue where other specialists can learn from each other, so that we’re providing good, informed care for our patients.”

It’s hard to imagine unwinding while simultaneously holding so many leadership positions, but somehow, he finds the time. Ashley and Dr. Higgins are parents to 12-year-old Connor and 8-year-old Riley. While they both keep him on his toes, Connor has started playing trumpet recently, a talent that Dr. Higgins has held since the fourth grade. Helping his son develop those same skills has been

enjoyable and rewarding. When he has downtime, he likes to stay active, enjoying playing basketball and softball. He loves watching sports, but when asked about his favorite teams, he said with a laugh that things have gotten complicated since he started fantasy leagues.

Rhinologist, board member, president, chairman, husband, father, fantasy sports expert...the list goes on and on. You may wear a lot of hats, Dr. Higgins, but you’re stylin’ for sure! ♣

Kathryn Vance is the Communication Specialist at the Greater Louisville Medical Society.



