

# Faculty Spotlight – Dr. Bruce E. Stewart,

## *The Man Behind the Mustache*



Dr. Bruce Stewart is “semi-retiring” at the end of this year from UArizona Department of Otolaryngology at Banner University Medicine - Tucson. He will continue working at the Veteran’s Hospital on Wednesdays and will fill in at the ENT Clinic from time to time as needed. We asked him to reflect on his life and career.

### Tell us about your background.

I am a Tucson native. My parents, Harry and Marjorie Stewart, had me when my sisters, Bonnie and Judy, were 10 and 13, so in a very real sense, I grew up having three moms. My dad—who was born in Globe when Arizona was still a territory—taught Electrical Engineering at the University of Arizona, and my mom was a homemaker and volunteer. They met during a blind date at the circus and were married three months later; this was during World War II.

In junior high, I started doing yardwork for Robert MacCaa, who had competed in the Olympics. He was like a grandfather to me. He was an avid coin collector and got me started in the hobby. I continued to work for him until his death while I was in college. I kept some seeds from the poppies he grew—they were beautiful but not DEA approved.

I studied Electrical Engineering at the University of Arizona but didn’t take classes with my dad to avoid any conflict of interest. It wasn’t until my junior year that I decided I would apply to medical school. My senior project was helping to develop a digital blood pressure monitor. I attended the University of Arizona Medical School, also. I will make you all jealous if I tell you that as a faculty brat, I was charged \$110 per semester, so I won’t tell you that.

I met my future wife, Jennifer, at the PLATO Lab at the UA. She was programming teaching lessons on her college summer breaks, while I was coding economic game simulations for Dr. Vernon Smith, who later received the Nobel Prize in Economics.

I decided pretty early on that I wanted to do surgery. I liked how patients—in general—got better once you fixed what was wrong—and it was a lot faster than prescribing pills. I chose Otolaryngology after being assigned it for my Junior surgical specialty clerkship. (Don’t tell anyone, but it wasn’t my first choice.) I found the surgery fascinating, and the attending and resident doctors all seemed happy and didn’t throw instruments in the OR.

Jennifer and I got married soon after my graduation from medical school, loaded our possessions into the moving truck and my ’62 Impala, and off we went to Salt Lake City, where I did my residency, and Jennifer finished her M.B.A. and worked

as an executive at American Express.

I did a year of general surgery, then I studied under Drs. James Parkin, Michael Stevens, and Leland Johnson. It was a small program with six residents. By pure coincidence, the resident three years ahead of me was the son of my parents’ next-door neighbor. At that time the residents were all from out of state. We quickly learned the byzantine rules of alcohol purchase and consumption in the Mormon mecca. One perk as chief resident was staffing the Miles City, Montana VA clinic once a month. We got to fly in a Learjet with a great view of the Grand Tetons. Sometimes the landings were a bit hairy in the winter. It was also a chance to bring some contraband alcohol back home.

Even though I spent five years in Salt Lake City, I never learned to downhill ski. But I also never hobbled around on crutches.

Our first daughter, Miranda, arrived 10 days after my residency graduation, and two weeks later we moved back to Tucson, where I began private practice with Tucson Ear, Nose and Throat. I was also an assistant professor in Otolaryngology at the University of Arizona.

We quickly had two more daughters, Robin and Amy—three girls: jackpot! —but in 1999, I was feeling restless. We decided to pull the girls out of school, and we went to Nepal to do medical mission work for three months. It really was a life-changing experience in many ways and cemented my resolve to give back whenever I could.



Dr. Stewart on a trip to the Amazon Rain Forest in Peru.

When we returned to Tucson, I left private practice and began working as a specialist at Davis Monthan Air Force Base. I stayed there for 12 years, taking care of air force personnel and their families. In 2011 when that contract ended, I cold called Dr. Alex Chiu, and he hired me to start the ENT clinic at South Campus, where I've been ever since. My first week there, I saw a homeless man with necrotizing fasciitis of his neck. Banner South is still the place where many of Tucson's poor people go for medical care, many of whom never had preventive care, and I felt needed. At South Campus, I'm the generalist. Everyone else has a specialty or even a subspecialty, but I'm the guy you want to see if you have earwax, need to be worked up for dizziness, are experiencing hearing loss, or whatever. For many years, I did lots of tubes and tonsils. Children are my favorite patients. In the past few years, with the pandemic, I've done many more tracheostomies. I have really enjoyed teaching the new residents how to do some of their first surgeries.

**What advice would you like to give to residents?**

If possible, put away money early for your retirement. Over many years, compound interest is amazing. Another thing that is bankable and pays off when you are as old as I am is exercise. I start the day on my exercise bike, and I lift weights three days a week. What you do every day matters. And don't forget to have fun! Somehow, I don't think this advice is needed. What a wonderful tight-knit group we have. This department really functions like a family.

**What advice would you like to give to your colleagues?**

Giving back to your community is important, plus it's also fun. My parents started a family foundation many years ago, with which I continue to fund many worthy nonprofit organizations like Make Way for Books. My wife and I are Flying Samaritans. We help staff an all-volunteer weekend clinic in Baja, México, flying down in teeny tiny planes that are almost as old as I am. I see patients, and Jennifer assists. I am also active in my church, serving on the Mission Team, taking care of the church finances, and delivering donated food to the Community Food Bank.



Dr. Stewart and his wife, Jennifer, volunteering with Flying Samaritans.

**What do you do in your spare time, and do you have any plans for retirement?**

I love to hike, and my wife and I would like to visit many more national parks. We also plan to do more international travel with our family when it is safe to do so. We are the Stewart Clan, so everyone wants to go to Scotland. I also will volunteer, perhaps with the Community Food Bank. I think it will be fun to drive a forklift.

**Final words?**

I would like to thank my boss, Dr. Steven Wang, my colleagues, the nurses, and staff for all they do—I wish I could list all their names here, but there are too many. But please know I appreciate and am grateful to you all. I am leaving, but I'm planning to help fund the Temporal Bone Lab, so that future residents have a chance to hone their surgical skills.

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