



Dr. Kristine Calhoun

# #GETTING TOKNOWDOS

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Division of General Surgery

## **SS: How is the continuation of CV19 impacting your life?**

**KC:** Have you got a couple of hours? [laughs] Remote learning for my children has been a juggling act. I have a three-year-old who was supposed to begin preschool and a 7-year-old who was in kindergarten last year and pivoted to remote learning. On top of this, I've been on the parent committee that looked at the reintroduction of remote learning and how it was going to look like in the fall. Let's say it was quite heated and interesting.

I think it's been an interesting time and I think we're just going to continue to see fallout from it. I do think one of the perks has been Zoom. I did a CME talk in Wenatchee. Instead of having to miss two days of clinic, I operated all day and then came into my office and gave the CME.

## **SS: When did you know you wanted to be a surgeon?**

**KC:** I was one of those who wanted to be a doctor for as long as I can remember but I came into medical school thinking I was going to be a pediatrician. Then I did my pediatrics rotation and found I do not do well in an all-clinic environment.

I was a medical student here and I did my surgical rotation at Harborview Medical Center (HMC). I was able to work a little bit with Hugh Foy and I was like, "oh, now I really like this!"

I thought maybe it was just the excitement of HMC because it's unlike any place. I gave it a shot and did a Sub-I with Dr. Kaj Johansen, a vascular surgeon who's just retiring and he's phenomenal. I did the Sub-I because I really wanted to do surgery but I wasn't sure. There was this mentality at that time that surgery is so hard and you can't have a family and do it all. There was also the archaic belief that you only went into surgery if there was nothing else that you could think of doing. I fell for all of those stereotypes at first and believed I couldn't do it. This as well as I'm a woman and there weren't as many women in the field at the time. I did a couple Sub-I's back to back, doing the surgery Sub-I first, and that's when I knew surgery was for me.

## **SS: What are your personal thoughts on being selected as a 2020 Top Doc in Seattle Magazine?"**

**KC:** It's flattering because it's a mark of approval and I think everyone enjoys being liked. It goes back to the whole Sally Field Oscar award acceptance speech, "You like me, you really like

me." I think it's easy for us to say, "oh, it's just a popularity contest," or "oh, well, look at all the UW docs on the list because they have this machine that can vote for all their UW docs." Honestly, I do believe it's an endorsement of your clinical work.

## **SS: What professional advice do you have for our new residents?**

**KC:** I think it's similar to parental advice. A couple of sayings come to mind... "it's a marathon, not a sprint," and "the days are long but the years are short." I think when you start off and you're looking at five or seven years, it seems you're going to be here forever but when you get to those middle years you may feel you've given up a lot and start questioning, "did I do the right thing?" Just keep your eye on the prize. It's the patients, when you are actually able to operate on them, that's most rewarding. You're actually correcting something and I think it's an honor to actually be able to do that. It's a huge compliment that someone trusts you to do that.

I won't lie, residency is hard and I almost quit a couple times. But if it is for you don't let the difficulty of residency dissuade you because it is a very fulfilling career. It's a long haul and we all get tired. Have your outlets and take care of yourself.

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## SS: What do you consider to be your most impressive achievement?

**KC:** Honestly, I think it's having two kids as a single mom. I got to the point in my life where I had to make some very difficult decisions. I have always been a "rule-follower," and in my mind, I thought, "well, I'm not following the typical rules and I'm not following the typical course." I was a little worried about how people in the department would see it when I announced that I was pregnant with my first son.

And I basically just said to myself, "You know what? I'm going to level the playing field here." I sent out an email and I said, this is it. Dr. Patch Dellinger was the first person who e-mailed me back. His email was a paragraph long and it was all in caps. It was classic Patch. And he said, "you just made the best choice of your life. There's nothing like it." He was so supportive. Dr. Carlos Pellegrini was the second person. He said, "This is fantastic! We will support you and everything!"

My first son, Gus, was born with a fairly severe cardiac abnormality and had to have surgery at three and a half months of age. He was hospitalized at 16 hours of life and transferred to Seattle Children's Hospital and spent a month there. It was very touch and go. It was a challenging time and subsequently he's had another heart surgery. I had my second child, Finn, almost 4 years after having my first.



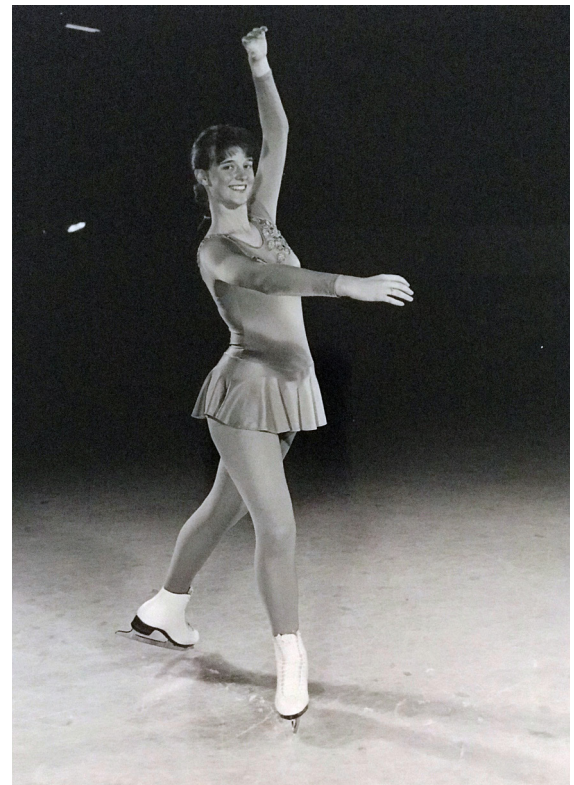
Finn & Gus Calhoun

So that's my proudest accomplishment because it was important to me. It did not go along the traditional channels. It's been hard but it's been incredibly worthwhile and I would never trade my kids for anything.

## SS: What has been a profound missed opportunity in your life?

**KC:** When I was four my dad used to play hockey at an old rink in Tacoma called the Lakewood Winter Club and I started figure skating there. I started with group lessons then private lessons and found I actually had talent in it. I competed at the local level and everything. I bowed to peer pressure when I got to be about seven or eight as my friends didn't like that I couldn't play with them and that I was spending all the time in the rink. So I quit. I picked it up again when I was in junior high, but I missed those really critical years.

I look back and I probably could have accomplished a lot more if had I stuck with it. It's one of those times I listened to others and made decisions for them and not myself.



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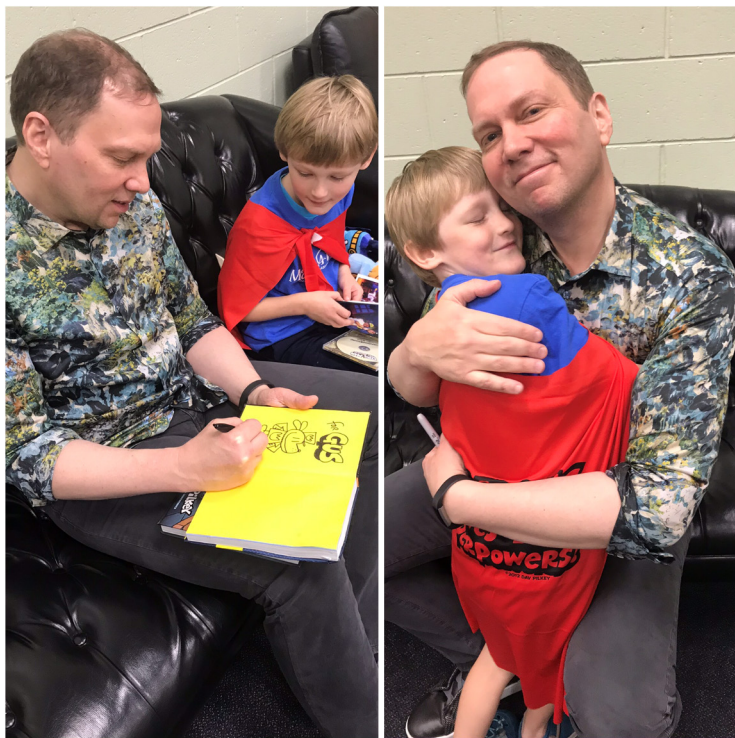


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## SS: What's been your most memorable vacation?

**KC:** My son Gus' Make A Wish® trip last October is most memorable. Gus was born with a heart defect qualifying him for Make-A-Wish® and his wish was to meet his absolute favorite author, Dav Pilkey, who writes and illustrates the "Captain Underpants" and "Dog Man" book series. We were flown to LA and had over an hour meet and greet with Dav. The wish also included going to a "Dog Man Do Good" tour stop with 3,000 other kids as well as awesome excursion to Universal Studios. Dav was amazing with Gus and for a couple days his cardiac condition made him special in a GOOD way.



Gus with Dav Pilkey

## SS: Do you have any travel plans after COVID travel restrictions lift?

**KC:** A gift to myself when I hopefully achieve promotion to professor is going to be a trip with my family to Australia and New Zealand. It's always been a goal of mine and it's always been on my list and it's time. It's going to be my present and my pat on the back. (When they actually will let an American in).

## SS: If you could know the answer to any question, what would that question be?

**KC:** Is there life on other planets. The reason I ask that is my son, Gus, right now is completely obsessed with planets—the solar system. He's constantly asking Siri, "Siri, what's the farthest planet?" and the like.

The universe is so huge that there has to be some other life out there. And are they aware of us? Are they just watching us? I would love to know is there life out there.

## SS: What is your fondest childhood memory?

**KC:** My paternal grandmother died when I was five. Interestingly, she died of neglected breast cancer. She had a mass and hid it thinking it would go away. But I have a very clear memory of her. Me and my cousin, Allison, who is only about six months younger than I am, would play in my Grandma Calhoun's backyard. She let us pick flowers and ride the family tricycle.

It's one of those memories where it was just a perfect time where I was with people that I loved and doing something that I loved at the time. I don't have many memories of her, so this is a very comforting memory.



Kristine, age 5 at her grandmother's house

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## **SS: What has been your biggest mind-blow in life?**

**KC:** I come from a very blue-collar family. My mom's dad actually immigrated from the former Yugoslavia so my mom is first generation American. Then my dad lost his father when he was 13. My mom was a teacher and my dad has a degree in fisheries but he always had to help out with the family. I don't think my dad necessarily tapped his potential.

So when I look at this, I placed education as always being very important so I set goals for myself. I look back and it sometimes amazes me I'm actually where I am because I'm in a very strong academic program and I've achieved the goals that I set for myself.

## **SS: What is your favorite movie genre?**

**KC:** I love action movies. One of my favorite movies of all time is "Die Hard."

I also like "Star Wars." I know it's science fiction but I also think of it as an action. I like things that are completely removed from my life and complete fantasy and the complete opposite of the life that I am living. In college, one Halloween I went as Princess Leia. I had really long hair, and I did the side-roll things on my hair.

The movie I cannot skip if I come across it on TV, "Gladiator." It does not matter where it is in the movie, if "Gladiator," is on I have to sit down and watch it.

## **SS: Who is your favorite music group or single vocalist?**

**KC:** Easy one. U2. I've seen them three or four times. The last time I wanted to see them I couldn't because I was 39 weeks pregnant with Finn. I didn't feel like it would be the wisest choice to go and stand at CenturyLink for hours. But I went to the tour before, which had been the tour they postponed because Bono had broken his back from a bike accident.

## **SS: What's your favorite Seattle restaurant?**

**KC:** I really like sushi—there are several places in Madison Park, and Wataru on 65th is really good as well. My one son, Gus, hates sushi but my other son, Finn, loves it. Finn is a sushi snob. He'll only eat the ahi tuna. If I bring it home, he'll eat the entire thing of ahi tuna as well as sashimi. He's a strange three-year-old.

## **SS: What do you believe is the meaning of life?**

**KC:** The meaning of life for me is we'll all have regrets but at the end, the goal is to look back and be satisfied with the path that you took.

Nobody's life is perfect. We all have disappointments and sometimes it's hard to move on from them but we have to. I believe all disappointments and failures build character. We're all on a path and I think in the end we get to where we're supposed to be.

## **SS: Tell us something that nobody knows about you.**

**KC:** I was an extra on the show Desperate Housewives. I wound up on the cutting room floor but I actually have a check paying me for my services. A patient of one of my mentors when I was a fellow in Los Angeles found out I loved the show, and he's like, "well, why don't you come on set one day?" So he had arranged for me to be "Mom Pushing Stroller." I got to spend all day on the set and met all the stars and everything. I met Teri Hatcher, James Denton, Marcia Cross and Nicolette Sheridan, and I have this Desperate Housewives' water bottle. It was my brush with fame.



James Denton, Kristine Calhoun & Teri Hatcher

Visit Dr. Calhoun's UW Medicine [provider page](#) to learn more about her education and training, clinical specialties and research.