

FORTY-THREE YEARS OF VETERINARY NEWS & MEDICINE

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# PULSE

Dr. George Katcherian

## *American Dreamer*

*"It's a wonderful,  
wonderful life"*

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# American Dreamer

*"Gulliver" is checked by Dr. Katcherian as Cory Day assists.*

**I**T'S A STORY OFTEN TOLD, and yet it remains as inspirational as ever; a young immigrant comes to the United States seeking opportunity and a chance at a better life. Through hard work, perseverance, and the good will of others, the immigrant succeeds and prospers beyond his greatest expectations. In many ways, it is the American story, retold and relived down through the generations. No one embodies it more fully, or savors it more deeply than Dr. George Katcherian.

Dr. Katcherian has lived that American Dream. Born and raised in Egypt, of Armenian descent, he came to the United States as a young man in the early 1970's: "I had no experience and I worked as a kennel boy, bathing dogs," he recalls. Today, he is a highly regard-

ed orthopedic surgeon, an entrepreneur who runs three business ventures, and a President-elect of the SCVMA, though he has elected not to serve the term.

He is also an infectious positive man. Spend just a few minutes with him, and you're likely to catch yourself smiling broadly. All his sentences seem to end in exclamation points. In talking about his wife and three accomplished children, his love of surgery, or his intense pride in his adopted country, he radiates optimism, enthusiasm, and patriotism.

## Coming to America

Dr. Katcherian credits his father with steering him toward a career in veterinary medicine: "My father had a major compassion toward animals and people.

He always told me, 'don't even hurt a fly.'"

Characteristically, young Dr. Katcherian started out with the loftiest of ambitions: "I wanted to save the hungry of the world, in Somalia, in India, I wanted to invent something to help them." You get the feeling he'd still like to fulfill that ambition.

He graduated from the University of Cairo in 1972 and disregarded a friend's advice about his future. "He told me, 'Don't ever emigrate to the United States, especially California,'" Dr. Katcherian recalls. "I asked him why, he said, 'Go to Canada, Australia, the opportunities are great, there is not a lot of competition.'"

But competition is not the sort of thing to scare off a man like Dr. Katcherian. He believed America was the place for him, in large part because



*"I go all over the country and it's wonderful. You see all that diversity we have and it's beautiful."*

of an unlikely inspiration: Lyndon Baines Johnson. "Growing up in Egypt, I read Johnson's life story," he explains. "I was really impressed by him, fascinated by the story of this man who became a Senator and ultimately a President."

The story made a lasting impression on a young man looking to make his way in the world. When it came time to decide his future, Dr. Katcherian remembered the rough-and-tumble Texan and thought: "I want my kids to be free and have a chance to build themselves up and be proud of themselves. If a man like Lyndon Johnson can be President, that impressed the heck out of me."

As for the competition, Dr. Katcherian puts a typically positive spin on it: "The challenge of competition, of building yourself from scratch, that's a wonderful opportunity and I'm blessed to have it."

### Starting from Scratch

Upon arriving in Southern California, Dr. Katcherian went to work as a kennel boy. He recalls those days fondly, boasting that in nine months of bathing dogs he heard "only one complaint!"

In the meantime, he studied to be licensed to practice in this country. Certification can be arduous for foreign-educated veterinarians. But Dr. Katcherian sees only the positive: "It's a wonderful process," he says, "If you don't pass, you study more and become a better doctor. It was a fascinating experience."

That experience had an enduring impact on him and shaped many of his views about the profession. It is one of the reasons why, in his leadership role with the SCVMA, he has put so much emphasis on the value of continuing



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education: "We require the highest level of education from our profession and we must keep it that way. That's why we are so progressive in this country, at the top of the medical fields. I'm for education and continuing education all the time."

While working toward his license, he advanced from kennel boy to technician; three years later he started his own practice in Orange. Eventually, he opened the Back Bay Veterinary Hospital in Newport Beach where he now focuses almost exclusively on orthopedic surgery.

### A Mentor's Influence

Dr. Katcherian knew early on that he wanted to concentrate on surgery. Even before getting licensed in this country, he sought out all the informal training he could get by going to watch surgeries and sit in on seminars. He explains his fascination: "In surgery, you can really see it, the before and after, especially in orthopedics. You can't hide it, or come up with some theory. It's right there, before and after."

He credits much of his success to the influence of others: "I was lucky enough to have some good mentors. My surgical practice did not succeed because I'm so smart, but because people were willing to teach me." One person toward whom he feels a special gratitude is the late Dr. Barklay Slocum, the innovative orthopedic surgeon who developed the

Tibial Plateau Leveling Osteotomy.

Dr. Katcherian is carrying on many of the ideas and techniques of this man he calls "The Einstein of Orthopedic Surgery." Dr. Katcherian says, "In my opinion, he revolutionized a lot of techniques and taught us how to think beyond the box. When I started out, I just wanted to be a great surgeon. He educated me, and re-educated me, and made me the surgeon I am."

Countless procedures later, Dr. Katcherian is as exuberant about his work as ever: "I enjoy it, it's the greatest thing that happened to me. It's a wonderful, wonderful life. I work six days a week. If I could work ten days a week, I would."

### New Ventures

He could probably use a couple extra days a week; in recent years, Dr. Katcherian has started two new business ventures: an animal crematorium and a medical supply company. The crematorium came about thanks to some advice from a real estate agent. When Dr. Katcherian bought the Newport Beach practice, it came with a sizeable plot of undeveloped land. The agent told him, "Do something related to veterinary medicine because you're a veterinarian. You're not a real estate guy or a broker, stay with something related to your business." He decided to build the crematorium and seven years later it has

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proven to be a sound decision.

More recently, another opportunity presented itself: "There was a hospital next to us and they were going out of business, liquidating their inventory. So I was buying things and I found out, hey, it's fun!" He started Dr. K's Medical Equipment and Supply: "I go all over the country and buy medical equipment from human hospitals that go bankrupt, or medical liquidations, and I sell it to my colleagues. When they come in, they're like kids in a candy store. They see all these supplies and they're like, 'Whoa!'"

Another fringe benefit of the business seems to please Dr. Katcherian most of all: the opportunity to travel throughout the land: "I go all over and it's wonderful. The Midwesterners, say, are different from

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New Yorkers or people in California. You see all that diversity we have and it's beautiful."

### Stepping Aside

When Dr. Katcherian first got involved with the SCVMA, it was almost inevitable he would end up as President of the Association. "I have an addictive personality type," he explains with a chuckle, "If I like something, I go for it all the way."

And in fact, he did become President-elect this year. But to the surprise of many of his colleagues, he decided to withdraw. "A lot of people are calling me," he says, "Asking, 'Why did you resign from your position? You are the President-elect, why didn't you go on to become the President?' And I said, I really don't have to be the President to serve my colleagues. I have been serving them these past years. I have been working since day one. I didn't have to wait to become President to work."

When asked what his inspiration from

so long ago, Lyndon Johnson might have thought of his decision, Dr. Katcherian pauses and then notes that Johnson also chose to step aside from the Presidency: "He did his job and that's it. I was honored to be elected. I have been honored to have a license and a practice. I am honored to become a good surgeon and get referrals."

### A Message of Hope

Optimist, enthusiast, patriot. In conversation, Dr. Katcherian exudes the unabashed patriotism that was rekindled in all Americans in the aftermath of September 11th. And as the nation prepares to mark the first anniversary of that tragic day, Dr. Katcherian's message is all the more poignant: "We have a great country, not because we're so smart, no. But because we have a great system. It's not complete, it's not perfect, but it's the best system that humanity has. And it's getting better. And we all have to get involved. And God Bless America."