

# When Medicine & Music Merge

**Joseph Markoff, PhD, MD, makes a gift to establish the *Markoff Family Fellowship* with the goal of studying artificial intelligence.**

It's not every day that your surgeon talks about the jazz club or orchestra he played in the night before. But if you were a patient of Joe Markoff, PhD, MD, this may have been a regular occurrence.

Simultaneous careers in medicine and music might seem like an impossible feat, but not for Joe. "They are surprisingly similar in that they both require four key characteristics," he said, "knowledge of your discipline, ability to communicate, confidence in your skills and the ability to relax under pressure, whether in the operating room or on stage."

Joe Markoff had every intention of pursuing a musical career. He enrolled at Oberlin College to perfect his art—the trumpet. "I loved the sound of the trumpet; it was in my DNA," he said. "But I realized that being a musician has challenges, and changed majors to neuroscience where I received an NSF research grant to study color vision." He earned a PhD from Syracuse University in the visual sciences.

Dr. Markoff began his career as a Principal Research Scientist at Honeywell, with a concentration in electrophysiology. Eventually, he enrolled at the University of Minnesota Medical School but kept one foot in the music world by performing with The Saint Paul Chamber and Minnesota Orchestras. "My music gigs paid for medical school," he said. The young physician then made his way to Wills Eye, completing his residency in 1978. "It was the best three years of my life," he said. "No other institution provides what Wills does: mentorship, complex cases, and resident and staff camaraderie. It's really a special place."

Dr. Markoff built a successful practice, Philadelphia Eye Associates, and served as Director of the Visual Physiology Service at Wills for three decades. In 2010, he became



▲ Joseph Markoff, PhD, MD, in his Center City Philadelphia home.

the use of intraocular lens implants as a secondary procedure. This began a lifelong friendship built on their shared dedication to medicine and music.

Throughout his four-decade ophthalmology career, Dr. Markoff stayed true to his passion for the trumpet. He was a guest musician with The Philadelphia Orchestra and principal trumpet in the World Doctors Orchestra. He performed with Sammy Davis Jr., Tony Bennett and Ella Fitzgerald, to name a few. "The trumpet allowed me to experience a whole other world and I'm grateful for all of it," he said. "It made me a better doctor."

Recently, Dr. Markoff has refocused his energies on consulting, music, golf and reading fine literature. "I will never truly retire," he said. In fact, his commitment to innovation and ophthalmology will continue in the form of

a recent gift to Wills Eye to establish the *Markoff Family Fellowship*. The purpose: To recruit a brilliant mind to study artificial intelligence (AI) and its use in artificial sight. "The community's understanding of the retina has advanced in recent years and I believe this is an area worth investigating."

The gift is a welcome infusion for the Vickie and Jack Farber Vision Research Center, where researchers had already been exploring AI. "Joe's gift will enable us to recruit a fellow who can acquire unparalleled clinical experiences while developing a unique skill set," shared Julia A. Haller, MD, Ophthalmologist-in-Chief. "We are excited to have this jet fuel to jumpstart the careers of our trainees and to uncover strategies that could revolutionize patient care. Joe's accomplishments are vast, but what makes him unique is his ability to imagine our future. I'm so grateful to him for giving Wills Eye this opportunity." ■■■

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— Joseph Markoff, PhD, MD

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the Global Director of Ophthalmology at Merck where he helped develop drugs for glaucoma. He attributes his success to staying on top of advancing technology and a willingness to try innovative procedures.

"I didn't do this alone," he said. "If it wasn't for the support and devotion of my wife, Phyllis, and our children, Melissa, Noah and Nicole, the success I have enjoyed would not have been possible."

At one point, he teamed with renowned ophthalmologist, musician and fellow Wills alum, Charles Kelman, MD, on

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**For more information about the *Markoff Family Fellowship* or to learn how you can support Wills Eye Hospital, contact John Zabinski, Chief Development Officer, at [jzabinski@willseye.org](mailto:jzabinski@willseye.org) or 215-440-3153.**