

BUSINESS PROFILE

The eyes have it

BY EVAN WILLIAMS
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"In medical school, I didn't think I'd specialize in this one little organ," ophthalmologist F. Rick Palmon, M.D., said of the human eye.

But as for the M.D. part, he was always a natural.

Palmon's parents, immigrants from the Philippines, were doctors — his father a cardiologist and his mother an anesthesiologist. Two of his four siblings, all sisters, also became doctors. His uncle is also an ophthalmologist.

"Coming from that background, it felt very comfortable going there, very familiar," he said. "Both my parents came from very poor backgrounds. From kindergarten I can remember my mom telling me the key to success was education."

In 1996, Palmon performed the first LASIK eye surgery — which uses a laser to reshape the cornea and correct vision — in Southwest Florida at the Cape Coral Surgery Center. Getting to that point, however, was a journey as difficult and thrilling as the destination.

Palmon was born in Philadelphia and grew up in Washington, DC.

"It was international community," he recalled. "Lots of languages, lots of arts, the Kennedy Center, the Symphony."

Under the watchful eye of his parents, he was always successful in school and considered becoming an engineer.

"But then I took Biology in high school, and I thought, I really like this," he said.

He attended college at Georgetown, where his mother had taught Anesthesiology. She died of breast cancer during his senior year

of high school, which he said furthered his medical ambitions. Palmon met his wife, Lillian (also a doctor), at Georgetown, where studies consumed most of the couple's free time.

"When you're a pre-med you have to maintain a high GPA," he said. "But after finals, there was an opportunity to go out. That was the time I was dating my wife, trying to decide if we'd spend the rest of our lives together."

The couple eventually chose to attend Tulane University School of Medicine in New Orleans and married over the Christmas holidays during their sophomore year.

"When medical school started, the amount of work went up exponentially," Palmon said.

His first year after medical school was spent in an Internal Medicine Internship at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania, in Philadelphia. He practiced general medicine, coming up with diagnoses and treatments for the patients there, then giving a presentation of those diagnoses to an a staff physician in charge of those patients, who would agree or disagree with the treatment plan. A popular television show called "House" depicts a group of interns something like this, struggling with personal relationships and sweating out diagnoses that may produce unexpected results in patients. But is the television show anything like the real thing?

"It's absolutely like that," Palmon confirmed.

His second year after medical school was spent in residency at Wills Eye Hospital, founded in the 1800s, at Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia.

"One of the few eye hospitals in the



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Ophthalmologist F. Rick Palmon, M.D.

nation," he said. "It was a great place to train. I saw just about every different eye disease out there. That's where I learned to operate. Believe it or not, there are seven different sub specialties of the eye."

After that, he spent time in a fellowship in diseases of the cornea at the University of Minnesota, where he learned to practice cornea and refractive surgery.

"Back then the laser was still investigational," he said.

Palmon eventually opened his own practice in South Fort Myers in 2003.

"There's college and medical school and four more years of training, and finally you can start paying back your loans," he said.

Since 2003, his practice has doubled in number of patients. He expects to outgrow his current space in a year or two and move to a new spot nearby, where he hopes to

establish long term relationships with his patients, and keep working with his current staff, which he said is all highly experienced.

He'll also keep trying new methods of treatment.

"Just yesterday I used a new glaucoma draining device for the first time," he said. "Today the patient was in and doing fantastic."

Glaucoma is a disease that without ongoing treatment can cause blindness, because of pressure in the eye — which Palmon said can be measured like blood pressure — being too high and killing off the optic nerve. The goal is to control the pressure so vision remains stable. The new device, he said, is tiny, and when placed inside the eye, stabilizes the pressure by controlling drainage. ■

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