

# Mark Kontos, MD

Dr. Kontos discusses his coincidental foray into ophthalmology and his experience as a flight surgeon with Top Gun.



## How did you choose ophthalmology?

Ophthalmology actually chose me. During my elective surgery rotation in medical school, I was planning to take an ear, nose, and throat (ENT) elective, but it was full. Ophthalmology was the only

elective still open, so I took that instead. Once I spent some time in the department assisting in surgery, playing with the instruments and cool lasers, and seeing how happy patients were to have their vision restored, I was sold. There is an ENT practice next to my office, and every day that I go into work, I am reminded of how lucky I was that the ENT rotation was full.

## What do you find most challenging in your field?

There certainly is no shortage of challenges in ophthalmology at present. Integrating rapidly changing technology, practice management, and financial concerns are all big issues for every ophthalmologist. However, the greatest challenge I face is managing and living up to my patients' expectations. I spend much more time talking to patients about what to expect and what not to expect from a planned surgery than I ever did in the past. I anticipate more of the same as laser cataract surgery and presbyopic correction become commonplace.

## What is your advice to the next generation of eye surgeons?

A couple of years ago, I was asked to give a lecture to a large group of residents and fellows who were about to enter private practice. The three best pieces of advice I gave them were (1) to seek out a mentor, someone they respected and with whom they could easily discuss their concerns and challenges, (2) to develop and maintain a strong network of peers in both the clinical and industrial sides of ophthalmology, and (3) not to be afraid to become an early adopter of new technology.

## In college, you participated in the Semester at Sea study abroad voyage. How did the experience influence you?

I took part in Semester at Sea during my junior year at the University of Colorado. The opportunity to sail around the



Dr. Kontos during his stint as the flight surgeon for Navy Fighter Weapons School (Top Gun).

world with other students from all over the globe influenced my life in many ways. The experience that had the most lasting impact occurred in India. While in Madras, I was invited by two physicians to spend the day with them at the hospital where they worked. To a young student whose only prior medical experience was volunteering at the student health clinic, the visit was eye opening. Seeing their dedication, in spite of limited resources and a seemingly never-ending demand, cemented my decision to be a doctor.

## What was it like to be a flight surgeon with Top Gun?

Prior to residency, I was fortunate to spend 3 years as the squadron flight surgeon for Navy Fighter Weapons School, also known as Top Gun. The movie of the same name was just about to be released, and it was a very exciting time, to say the least. The pilots I had the privilege to fly with daily were the most dedicated, focused, and professional individuals I have ever known. They once told me a story about a slightly crazy squadron mate who had left the best job in the world (flying fighter jets) to pursue a career as an eye doctor. Four years later, when I was chief ophthalmology resident at San Diego Naval Hospital, that pilot showed up as one of the new residents and introduced himself as Steven Schallhorn. I taught him a little that year and then learned a lot from him later. We have been friends ever since. ■