

ALEX Y. BEKKER, MD'91

# Giving Back to a School that “Gave Me a Lot”

BY GENENE W. MORRIS

When Alex Y. Bekker, MD, PhD, graduated from New Jersey Medical School, he knew he would someday return to the institution as a member of its faculty. So when, in 2012, he was offered the opportunity to chair the medical school's Department of Anesthesiology, he jumped at it.

“I had prospects to be chair in other departments (at different schools) but I never truly considered any of them because ultimately I wanted to come back to NJMS,” says Bekker, who left his post as vice chair of research and chief of the division of neurosurgical anesthesia at the New York University School of Medicine's Department of

Anesthesiology. For him, the offer from his *alma mater* represented a chance to give back to an institution that helped make so many of his dreams a reality.

“This school gave me a lot,” says Bekker, noting that the clinical skills he acquired as an NJMS student helped to make him a standout resident at Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center. “I was a top performer there because NJMS prepares students to be very good clinicians.”

When Bekker joined NJMS, he says there was a lot of enthusiasm about the school's future. Robert L. Johnson, MD, had been selected as its dean, ushering in a new era.

Bekker capitalized on the excitement by pushing forward ambitious plans to make his

department a preeminent force in academia by clearly communicating his vision for the group; emphasizing the importance of teambuilding; promoting diversity; recruiting new talent, while recognizing and developing existing ones; and supporting the career goals of faculty. “We encourage people to spend time creating an atmosphere of camaraderie,” says Bekker, who annually hosts a themed gathering at his house offering cuisine from a featured culture.

One of his early moves was to rename the “Department of Anesthesiology” the “Department of Anesthesia and Perioperative Care.” It was a change that reflects a trend in medicine, he says. “People realize that anesthesiologists should be seen not just as intraoperative but more like perioperative physicians. We can oversee all kinds of care of patients, from the moment that patients sign up for surgery to their discharge,” says Bekker, who chaired the perioperative steering committee and currently co-chairs the OR committee at University Hospital in Newark. He also continues to practice clinically.

In the three years since joining NJMS, Bekker has also revitalized the department's clinical research program with the help of the department's Vice Chair of Research Yuan-Xiang Tao, PhD, MD, a widely respected authority in neuroscience and pain research, recruited from Johns Hopkins University. The department of 27 faculty members has seen its level of participation in research increase and watched its national NIH ranking grow from 49 in 2011 to 24 this year. “In the tristate area, we are above similar departments at NYU, Mount Sinai, Cornell, and Montefiore,” he says.

Furthermore, he notes, the department's residency program has expanded from 27 spots to 33 and residents are passing their boards “at 100 percent for the third year in a row.” Also, medical students who rotated through the department and applied to anesthesiology residencies matched to competitive programs, including Brigham and Women's Hospital and Columbia-



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## 1960s

**Marinos A. Petratos, MD'60** received a "Certificate of Appreciation" for active military service during the "Cold War," issued by the Governor of the State of New York.

**Harry E. Turse, MD'69** writes that his daughter, Sarah, is a third year pediatric resident at the University of Virginia.

## 1970s

**Albert Ray, MD'70** received The Felix Linetsky Award for Excellence in Medical Education in 2012 and recently received the 2015 Florida Academy of Pain Medicine Distinguished Service Award. He edited the *Integrative Approaches* section of the

## IN MEMORIAM

**Elizabeth A. Lincoln, MD'87** of Evergreen, Colorado, passed away on January 5, 2015 at the age of 54. She is survived by family members including her husband James Lyndon, son Thomas, parents Thomas and Renee Lincoln, and sister Catherine Lincoln. She dedicated her career to serving veterans as a primary care provider for the Veterans Health Administration in Boston, Salt Lake City, and Denver. She was an accomplished musician and singer.

**Joanne Mambretti, MD'73** passed away on June 21, 2014. She practiced pulmonary and internal medicine in Worcester, MA; was a medical consultant for Paul Revere Life Insurance, and moved to Minneapolis, MN, in 1966, where she worked for Prudential Insurance. Dr. Mambretti retired in 2013 as Vice President and Medical Director of that organization. She is survived by her children Ann, Mark, and Matthew Zumwalt.

**John J. McMahon, IV, MD'88** passed away on June 7, 2015 at the age of 54. He resided in Brooklyn, NY. Dr. McMahon was a member of the cardiothoracic surgery staff at Queens Hospital, NY. He is survived by his parents, John J. and Joyce McMahon, and his children, Robin, Angela, and John V. McMahon.

**Mrs. Alice J. Tassoni** passed away at the age of 86 on July 18, 2015. She was married to the late Dr. Joseph P. Tassoni, Sr, who was the Dean of Students and Director of Admissions at New Jersey Medical School. Mrs. Tassoni is survived by her children Elizabeth Jerlinski, Pamela Russo, and Joseph P. Tassoni, Jr, and four grandchildren.

*Comprehensive Treatment of Chronic Pain by Medical, Interventional, and Integrative Approaches*—an American Academy of Pain Medicine textbook on patient management, and authored three chapters in 2013.

**Rudolph S. Wagner, MD'78** writes that he is pleased to be a member of the Alumni Association and has joined, thanks to the helpfulness of Emily Birkitt.

## 1980s

**Luis E. Rios, Jr, MD'82, MPH, FACEP** retired from private practice in emergency medicine and accepted a full-time faculty position in the Department of Emergency Medicine, Division of Field Operations at UF Health College of Medicine/Jacksonville. Dr. Rios is the current Chief Medical Officer of the Disaster Medical Assistance Team FL-4 in DHHs/ASPR/OPEO/NDMS and the Department of Health Florida State Medical Response Team FL-3.

**Vincent J. Palusci, MD'84** will publish his fifth book entitled *Diagnosis of Non-Accidental Injury: Illustrated Clinical Cases* with the CRC Press this fall. He is professor of pediatrics at NYU School of Medicine and is a child abuse pediatrician at Bellevue Hospital.

## 2010s

**Melissa Martin, MD'13** shares that she and her husband Chris welcomed their first child, Emily Ann, on February 7, 2015.

## Bekker

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Presbyterian. And "clinically speaking," Bekker adds "last year was our highest earning in the history of this department."

This chair's life and career have been defined by bold moves. Growing up in a region of the Soviet Union now called Georgia, he dreamed of working as a scientist in academia. He earned a degree in chemistry from Tbilisi State University and began working. But when advancement eluded the young researcher in his homeland, he turned his sights to America.

Once in the U.S., Bekker pursued a master's in chemical engineering and a doctorate in biomedical engineering from the New Jersey Institute of Technology. He later went to work for AlliedSignal, where he earned six patents related to ways to recover oil. Though he was successful in the private sector, Bekker decided to pursue a medical degree.

"When I went to medical school, I was older than most people. I already had a PhD," Bekker says. He chose anesthesiology because "it's a very technology-intensive field." With the support of his wife, Karen, he finished medical school—during which time his three children, Andrew, Tatiana, and William were born.

Today, a distinguished scientist, anesthesiologist, and educator who has served as principal investigator on numerous studies and has published scores of peer-reviewed articles, Bekker is living out his dreams. He is broadly known for his research on understanding the effects of surgery on the central nervous system and frequently presents at conferences. Last August, he presented two lectures at an international conference on brain disorders and therapeutics in London.

Now Bekker is focusing his attention on helping others at the very place where he got his start. "I always felt I was fortunate to have graduated from NJMS," he states. "A lot of things in my life worked out very well." ●

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