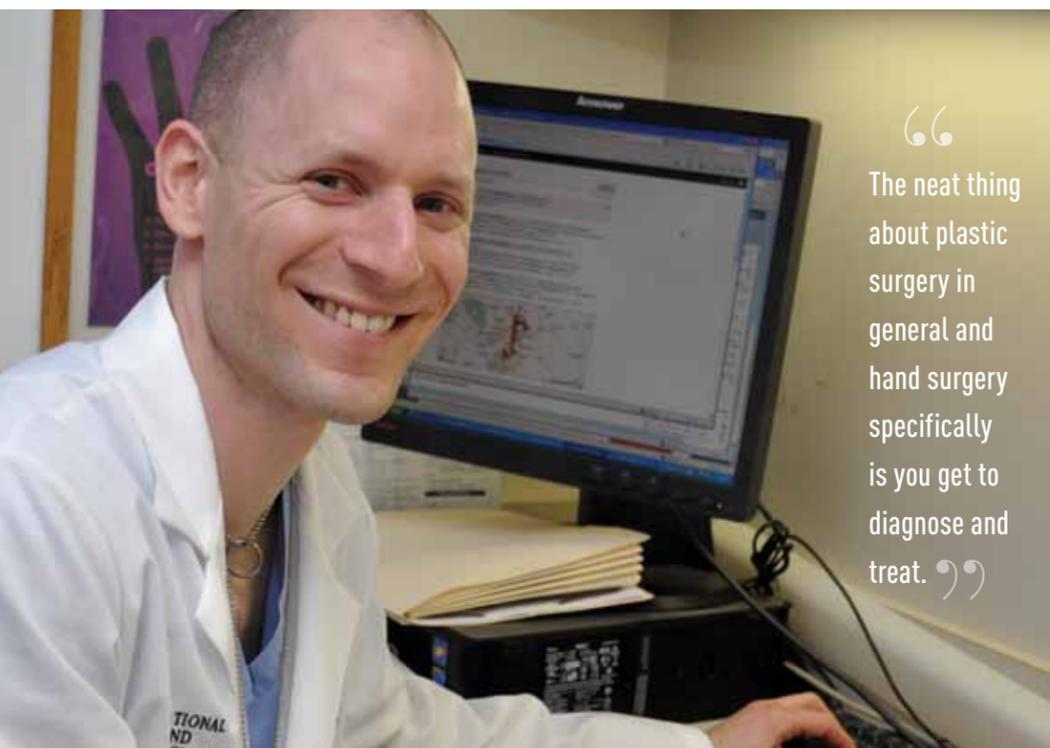


## Stretching to New Levels



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man impassioned by his profession. When you ask the physician, who specializes in plastic and reconstructive surgery at the Curtis National Hand Center of Baltimore's Union Memorial Hospital, just how amazed he is by his ability to actually have done those things, he gives a small shake of his head, like the question isn't relevant.

“I'm more amazed at the patient's ability to recover and bounce back,” he says. “By the robustness of humanity, that seems to provide the ability to have an equilibrium even in the worst of circumstances. But it is a very satisfying job. You can really make an impact on people's lives—alleviate pain and give back function. These are achievable goals and that's what I love about it.”

A Maryland native, Katz grew up in Rockville, always knowing he wanted to be a doctor.

“I never wanted to do anything else,” he says, even though there are no other doctors in his family or physician role models he recalls.

“We definitely had the Fisher-Price doctor kit,” he relates, his blue eyes alight with memory. “I'm sure there was some parental planting of seeds, but really, it seems it was just a calling of the profession.”

Katz did his undergrad work at Duke University and then chose the Maryland.

ENVISION reattaching a meat cutter's thumb with such precision he can return to his livelihood. Then, conjure, if you can, you and your team of doctors, being able to correct a child's deformity by reconstructing his forearm with his toe—using nearly the entire toe with growth plates to replace elements of the forearm he was born without.

Or imagine a burn victim whose elbow joints, hands, and fingers have fused so close to his face he has no use of them. And then imagine you, again with your medical team, have been able to release his right elbow, extend his arm and move his thumb so that he can be restored to something of a normal life.

Imagine.

How amazed would you be with yourself?

Now, meet **Ryan Katz, '02**, a

“I chose Maryland Med because it has a great reputation; it was my state school; and I liked the idea of being back home,” Katz says. “Maryland hospitals are top notch. It kind of put me in the thick of it. This place is simply a hub for medicine.”

It was midway through his third year when he heard a lecture by **Nelson Goldberg, '73**, on plastic surgery.

“I thought, ‘This is amazing! This is what I want to do!’ his voice, even today, reflecting the excitement he felt and still feels at the memory. “I know a lot of people think of plastic surgery as aesthetic surgery, and even though that's part of it, what Dr. Goldberg showed us was reconstructive surgery. And that was it for me.”

He was, however, for a moment, conflicted. He thought he wanted to do internal medicine, until **Frank M. Calia, MD, MACP**, former professor and medicine chair, told him “good surgeons know their medicine.”

“I believe he was right,” Katz says of his mentor. “I could keep up on my diagnostic skills and keep my thinking cap on. Sometimes you are treating more than just the hand. The neat thing about plastic surgery in general and hand surgery specifically is you get to diagnose and treat. You have to figure out the problems and then make it better. That's what I was looking for.”

“Some of the stuff you can do with the patient wide awake; so the patient can see the end result immediately on the table: a patient who had lost the ability to flex their digits, and then at the end of the case, you say, ‘Make a fist.’ And they can move their hand again. That's unbelievably rewarding for me. And that's the spark that Dr. Goldberg gave me that ignited the fire.”

From those inspiring beginnings, Katz, 41, who is married with three children, has gone on to do surgeries few are willing to attempt—like transplanting those foot bones to help that 8-year-old gain a balanced forearm, future growth and the possibility of forearm rotation. It was the first surgery of its kind in the United States.

There are many complicated issues Katz wants to tackle. For instance: why does a hand stiffen after trauma? How can doctors be better at reconstructing a thumb with a toe?

“You have to have function and motion,” he says. “I'm passionate about these surgeries. I'm always pushing myself to find better ways.”

It is those kinds of unusual situations Katz wants to pursue. At the Curtis National Hand Center, he is positioned to do that. It is one of the Top 10 such centers in the world. And it also positions him to leave a legacy, as he teaches residents and fellows there.

“I really like complex cases,” says Katz, who shares them with the Curtis fellows he instructs. “I would like to train the fellows to like the things I like so they go on to inherit these kinds of cases.”

He does admit, though, that it takes a certain kind of person to do the job. Yes, it takes stamina, steady nerves and dedication, but Katz believes there is something even more important.

“I think loving it is everything,” he says. “If you don't love it, you might find the training and the work to be cumbersome and onerous. You have to try to hit a bull's-eye every time. It's what the patient wants and what you want. You have to love it. When you are doing it, you are not thinking about anything else. You have to be present at cases, seeing, watching, and doing. If you don't have the technique down, you won't have the luxury of focusing on the big problem.”

For Katz, these surgeries, like the performance of a piano virtuoso, don't just happen. They take practice, hard work, focus, dedication—and, yes, love.

And, in the end, it is all worth it, he says: “When someone comes in with fingers or a thumb cut off and you take them through the journey from start to finish and at the end you deliver a result they couldn't have imagined was possible, that's a very good day.” 🏠

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