



# In Memorium Richard D. “Nik” Nikolaev August 24, 1938 – December 19, 2019

*Cipolletti, G<sup>1</sup>*

The worldwide orthopaedic industry lost one of our true giants, as Nik Nikolaev passed away in December of last year. Nik is survived by Sandy, his wife of nearly 60 years, daughter Kimberly and son Cort, of whom he was immensely proud. He is also survived by all of us who had the privilege of knowing and working with him, and by the millions of patients who received the gift of a new prosthesis that Nik was responsible for commercializing.

Nik was born in Moscow at the advent of the second world war and was shipped to the Ural Mountains with millions of civilians fleeing the German invasion. Nik’s dad was exiled to Siberia and was never heard from again. Nik would recall his arduous journey out of Russia with his mother after the war, travelling on a cargo ship across the Black Sea, through the Suez Canal, and eventually finding their way to New York. The family relocated to Denver, where he spent most of his childhood. Nik had a strong desire to make his own way, joining the Marines at age 17. The strong, focused mind and self-discipline that were Nik’s trademarks were almost certainly planted in these formative years.

Nik’s legendary orthopaedic career got started with DePuy in 1966. At that time, DePuy’s product line consisted mostly of plaster casting products, and his territory was the entire southwestern United States! He was very successful in the field, and was asked to take over as the product manager for a new product line – the Mueller Total Hip System, which in 1969 was the first commercially available total hip replacement system in the U.S. The suc-

cess of this new technology in the market place led to positions over the next 5 years as National Sales Manager and Vice President of Sales and Marketing, creating training programs and recruiting what was to become one of the strongest international sales and marketing teams our industry has ever seen.

Nik was an excellent salesman and sales leader, but it was his vision of the future that will be his legacy. He took over as Executive Vice President for DePuy in 1975, overseeing all commercial and R&D activities for the company. He saw the future in cementless total hips, purchasing the company that developed the technology to sinter spherical beads onto an implant, then recruited Dr.’s Austin Moore and Emmett Lunceford to design what would become the AML stem. This was the first device to go through the new “PMA” process, and of course was the gold standard for cementless fixation for many years. Similarly, Nik recruited Dr.’s Beuchel and Pappas, introducing the first mobile bearing total knee system, the LCS. Again opting for the



*Richard D. Nikolaev*

PMA route, this technology (since bought by J & J) remains the only mobile bearing knee available in the U.S.

In 1984, Nik was recruited by the Swiss company Protek, A.G., to become the President and CEO of their struggling US operation. Over the next 6 years, he presided over an average growth rate of 25% per year with excellent profitability, helping to create enough value that the parent was acquired in 1990.

This began the first in a series of the one area where Nik consistently “failed” – retirement. He joined the Board of Orthomet, Inc. after doing some consulting with them, only to be called on to take over as CEO when the company logged another dismal quarter of no growth and no profitability. Of course, Nik was able to turn things around, turning a profit in just his second quarter and growing at an average rate of 35%/year. The company’s stock nearly tripled in value over 4 years, and was acquired by Wright Medical technology.

After a brief stint as CEO of Osteobiologics, Inc., Wright asked Nik to step in and lead the company as President and CEO, hoping to reduce their losses and revamp the product lines. He was able to bring costs under control, and brought the new Advanced Medial Pivot Knee to market with Mr. Michael Freeman and Dr. Kent Samuelson. He began the development of new extremity and biologics platforms, which eventually enabled WMT to divest its large joint products and focus on extremities.

Nik served on many Boards after leaving Wright and accepted the job as Chairman of the Board for a small startup, OMNI life science, Inc., serving from 2006 through 2013. He was a very active Chairman, instrumental in several key acquisitions and financings. On his watch, the company grew from a little over \$5mm in sales to nearly \$50mm.

Nik seemed to know everyone in our business. It was impossible to walk more than 50 feet with him at a AAOS meeting without someone stopping him to say hello. Those who worked for Nik remember him as “tough but fair”, and he never asked anyone to work harder than he did. He would be on the Academy floor 30 minutes before opening through closing, and wouldn’t tolerate anyone sitting in the booth. He developed a unique way of letting you know when you were in trouble with him- he would leave a stuffed Gorilla on your chair. It was bad enough to get a Gorilla, but Heaven help you if you didn’t know why you got it!

#### SUBMISSION HISTORY

Submitted: July 16, 2020

Accepted: July 16, 2020

Published: July 22, 2019

#### AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

- 1 George Cipolletti  
Corporate Strategic Advisor at Corin Group, Raynham, Massachusetts USA  
(Direct reprint requests to George Cipolletti, gcipolletti@gmail.com)

#### AUTHOR DISCLOSURES

The authors declare that there are no disclosures regarding the publication of this paper.

#### COPYRIGHT & OPEN ACCESS

© 2020 Cipolletti. All rights reserved.

Authors retain copyright and grant the journal right of first publication with the work. Reconstructive Review is an open access publication and follows the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial CC BY-NC](#). This license allows anyone to download works, build upon the material, and share them with others for non-commercial purposes as long as they credit the senior author, Reconstructive Review, and the Joint Implant Surgery & Research Foundation (JISRF). An example credit would be: “Courtesy of (senior author’s name), Reconstructive Review, JISRF, Chagrin Falls, Ohio”.

