

Social Soles

Interview by Debra Bauman



KEN URISH, MD,

Associate Director,
Magee Bone and Joint Center
& *SUPER DAD*

The Social Soles interview series is based on the saying, “You don’t really know someone until you have walked in his shoes.” We thought it would be interesting to begin each interview asking our guest to bring a pair of shoes that are significant to him. They can be a pair he wore to his first day of medical school, the pair he wore during his residency, the pair he wore to his wedding, his daughter’s first pair, his son’s first pair, ... What shoes will he bring?

We associate shoes with memories: good and bad. This question steers the path of our conversation. This route will show us a side usually not seen in the one we are talking with. We believe a more personal side. We are excited to see in which direction we are lead – by the choice in footwear and the memories stirred. Come. Let’s take a walk... June is a busy month full of change: a change in the weather from spring to summer; a change in students’ lives as they celebrate their accomplishments through graduation parties and plan for the next stage. Change is a constant in all our lives – whether we like it or not! One of the biggest changes? Becoming a parent. As we officially honor –FATHERS – by celebrating Father’s Day, let’s look at the changes parent/fatherhood brings. For some, like Ken Urish, MD, Associate Director, Magee Bone and Joint Center, this change means looking toward mentors, family and friends for the Social Support they provide.

Social Butterfly Magazine: What shoes have you chosen to share with us today?

Dr. Ken Urish: I brought the shoes I bought when I was a fourth year medical student, right after I figured out I wanted to go into orthopedics. They’re almost 10 years old. They are hideously ugly shoes.

SBM: Wow, almost 10! Why did you originally buy them?

Urish: Everybody usually wears Danskos up in the OR, but when you’re a medical student, or you’re an intern, you’re running, you’re putting some serious miles on the shoes. The whole point of the Danskos is that you can stand in them for 12 hours, and they have great arch support. But I kept turning my ankle because the Danskos don’t have lace ups. I needed some new shoes. So I went up to Little’s in Squirrel Hill and said, “I need something with lace ups” and he said, “You need these.” And they were around \$160, and I thought, “I’m a fourth year medical student, I don’t have any money. I can’t believe I’m about to spend \$160 dollars on shoes!”

SBM: What kind of shoes are they?

Urish: The shoe brand is Ecco. They are the black leather, lace up, Oxfords.

SBM: Were they with you all through medical school?

Urish: I wore them through my acting internship and all of the really important medical school clerkships you go through in the OR. There was a bad winter snowstorm, probably about five years ago, so I spent a week in the hospital because I couldn’t get back to my place, in the shoes. If you’re

on call, you’re jumping out of bed in an instant, so you sleep with your shoes on.

I did part of medical school in the shoes, I did all of residency in the shoes at Penn State. Orthopedics is all about plaster, it’s super messy. When the junior residents present their cases to the entire department, they’re covered in plaster. The shoes would just be white.

I did fellowship at Massachusetts General Hospital in the shoes – that’s where I started my practice. So I started my practice, my first operative cases, in the shoes. When I started here with Magee Bone and Joint Center, my first case was specifically in these shoes.

SBM: They’ve been with you through a lot! – Medical school’s not easy. Who was your Social Support during the development of your professional career?

Urish: The guys up at Penn State were awesome. Jim Fenwick, MD, Chip Davis, MD, David Maish, MD, and Kevin Black, MD. You don’t get through residency without very good mentoring, and I had the best mentors up there.

SBM: A lot of important professional experiences, to be sure. Do you have personal memories in the shoes, too?

Urish: I met my wife, Mary, she was emergency medicine, in these shoes – I got my wife to go on a date with me in these shoes!

SBM: (Awel)

Urish: Katie (Ken and Mary’s daughter, now three years old), was born the very last day of residency. I

was post-call, I’d been up for however many hours, and I was in somebody’s office. This was an epic “I am done,” tying up some loose ends, and they’re trying to get a hold of me, but I had turned my pager in, so they ended up calling the outside secretary. She comes running in saying, “Your wife is giving birth!” Mary was actually in the ER, it was her last shift. She had a C-section. So I went up to the OR for her delivery, in the shoes.

I probably would have been wearing the shoes for Ken’s (Ken and Mary’s son, now eight months) delivery, except it happened so fast, I don’t even know if I was wearing shoes! In the middle of the night Mary said, “I think it’s time,” so we raced to Magee, and she was fully dilated at that point, so they took her back and she delivered.

SBM: Medical school, dating, marriage, practitioner, surgeon... You’ve grown up in these things! They were well worth the \$160! What is it like now balancing work and being a father?

Urish: It’s really hard. The tricky part becomes making sure that you’re taking really good care of your patients, but that you’re also around for your kids. That’s hard. I don’t have the answer to that one yet.

SBM: (Always learning!)

Urish: But it’s also a lot of fun, because now, when I come home, Katie has been able to figure out that when the garage door opens, dad’s coming home. So I drive in, and she opens the door, and she’s jumping up and down saying, ‘daddy’s home!’ Then I get a big hug, it’s awesome.

I bring them in off hours, like if I have to come in on the weekend to get something done. Especially if my wife’s working, I’ll bring Katie in if I have to get something off the computer. So we get something done in the office, and then we’ll go over to the playground at Schenley Park. That’s why she likes to come to the hospital, because she knows she goes to the playground afterward.

SBM: Has Katie shown interest in your work? Another future physician in the family?

Urish: What’s fun with Katie right now is that every two days she has a new interest. People have brought that up because it’s a two physician family, saying “Your kids are going to be physicians.” The only way you can end up being a physician and do well is if you have a true passion for it, you really need to like what you do. For whatever my kids would end up doing, I just really want them to enjoy what they’re doing, and to have a passion for it, because, if you don’t have a passion, if you don’t enjoy medicine, then there’s no way you’re going to get through it all.



SBM: Who do you rely on for Social Support, with you and your wife both being physicians and having two kids? You must be busier than ever!

Urish: The grandparents are unbelievable. Mary’s mom will come out and live with us for a month or two at a time. My mom’s 10 miles away, so she’s over all the time. The granddads are over, pap pap and grandpa, and they show up and demonstrate that the grandmas are much better, but they have lots of fun! They have good intentions.

My wife balances being in the emergency room with these crazy hours, and then coming home and being jumped by kids. Ken was just born, so she’s on mom duty a lot more than I am.

SBM: (Super Mom and Super Dad – They are one awesome family!)

Urish: I have unbelievable partners here at work as well, between Anthony DiGioia, MD, Brian Hamlin, MD and Anton Plakseychuk, MD, it’s an unbelievable group of physicians to be working with. It’s unusual to have a group of surgeons be able to get along really well, and it’s a really great place to be. Freddie Fu, MD, Chair Orthopedic Surgery, Fran Solano, MD, President Community Medicine and Tony DiGioia, MD, Director, Magee Bone and Joint Center, those were the three people who recruited me back here when I was up at Harvard, and they put together such an unbelievable set up. I’m the luckiest guy in the world right now.

SBM: What feelings do the shoes evoke when you see them now?

Urish: These shoes have been through unbelievable amounts of crazy experiences in the trauma bay. There was a mass casualty alert I survived in these shoes. When you’re in the trauma bay, crazy things are happening. It’s really a very intimate way to get to know somebody. They’re telling you things they’d never tell their closest loved ones. Or you have parents running in because they heard their kids were in a car accident, and they have an enormous amount of relief because their kid had a banged up knee and it was no big deal.

So, from a serious perspective, when I leave the hospital, I leave right by the emergency room, because, you can have some bad days and good days, but no matter what happened, when you leave by the emergency room, there’s always someone who’s having a much harder time than you are right now. These shoes have seen it all.

No one appreciates, speaking of shoes, the unbelievable blessing to be able to walk a block, and not have it hurt. At Magee Bone and Joint Center, half of the waiting room is people who are not doing what they want to do, in a lot of pain. I talk to medical students, and I sound completely hokey, like, “Listen, you don’t appreciate that we’re young, and can walk wherever we want to.” I walk a block and don’t even think twice about it. But if you’ve got bad hip or knee arthritis, it’s really hard to walk a block.

SBM: (Always teaching!)

Urish: So we’ll have people who’ll come in in wheelchairs, or they’re using canes, and they’re miserable because they can’t do what they want to do. So half the room, they have these really big problems. And the other half of the room, they have a total hip or knee replacement – post op cases are so much fun because they come back in and they’ll say, “Why didn’t I do this sooner? I feel so much better!” And it’s really simple things like, “I’m walking around my



neighborhood.” They love it. It’s really important to be able to walk, it’s completely taken for granted. It’s a blessing to be able to walk around and not have it hurt at all. So it’s a good kind of grounding thing that you have all these people who say, “I just want to be able to walk a few feet and not have it hurt.”

SBM: Do you keep the shoes someplace special, or do you still wear them?

Urish: I wore the shoes for almost nine years straight. Now, I keep them up in my locker, and if I pull them out, that means it’s going to be a tough case, something really challenging.

One of the reasons I picked joint replacement is I really enjoy the hard, challenging complex revisions. They’re very hard cases. When I talk to patients about some of the revisions, I use the analogy of a tool belt, and you have lots of different tools, if this happens we’ll do this, if this pops up, we have this for the next step. One of the tools in the armada is the shoes.

So yes, I do wear them now, they’re completely functional, although the one is getting a little hole. But they’re in really great shape for being almost 10. The important thing is to have a really good shoe repairman! They’ve been stitched up and polished.

SBM: (Is that a metaphor – a shoe and repairman for a joint and orthopedic surgeon? Dr. Ken, if I ever need a new hip – you’re the man! Seriously – not going to take walking for granted!)

When you’re not wearing THE shoes, what shoes are you wearing?

Urish: My go-to shoes now, up in the OR, are the black Danskos.

SBM: If your shoes could speak, what would they say?

Urish: ‘Remember where you came from, and take good care of patients’...and ‘you married up!’

SBM: Stepping back, if you could wear someone else’s shoes, whose would they be?

Urish: My wife’s, because she’s completely underappreciated, and if I were wearing her shoes – I understand that her job is impossible – but then I’d have a really strong appreciation for how unbelievably impossible that I don’t appreciate her job is.

SBM: (Dr. Ken – You may have married up, but I think your wife would agree that she didn’t do so bad either in saying, “Yes” to you. Happy Father’s Day, Dr. Dad!) ●

Check out our Social Kid’s Calendar on page 82 so you don’t miss any Kid Celebrations, & our other Social Calendars of Special Days, in this issue & at SocialButterflyMagazine.com.