RELYING ON INTUITION BORN OF EXPERIENCE, Ronald W. Busuttil tears around hairpin turns in the Italian Alps, hitting speed in the straights, adjusting for every twist and bump in the road, reacting to each note of his car’s roaring engine, smelling the familiar combination of exhaust and tires, gauging when to shift gears as he senses the load on the eight cylinders of his powerful blue sports car, which feels like an extension of his mind and body. He adapts so well to high speed that everything around him seems to be moving slowly.

Busuttil is at one with the race as each meter of each kilometer passes under his 1952 Siata 400L during the 1,000-mile Mille Miglia, perhaps the world’s premier race for vintage high-performance automobiles (1927 to 1957).

Being at one with his environment and functioning masterfully at high speed are key to this many-faceted, 58-year-old physician’s multitude of successes, including his remarkable achievements at UCLA.

At the beginning of 2004, Busuttil became chair of surgery at the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA. Add to that title these roles: one of the world’s premier liver transplant surgeons, a dedicated family man, cyclist, tennis player and jogger, plus enthusiastic traveler, avid reader, caring friend, keen observer and you have a pretty fair picture of Busuttil.

He’s running a surgery department acknowledged to be one of the best in the nation. And he’s determined to make it even better.

When Busuttil talks about his goal for the Department of Surgery he is, as usual, passionate and concise:

“My primary goal is to excel in our academic mission,” he says. “To do that we need to accomplish four ends.”

He quickly ticks them off:

❖ Pursue and accomplish the best and most innovative medical treatment anywhere
❖ Renew a spirit of teaching and mentorship in our young faculty, residents and students
❖ Increase research creativity
❖ Raise $50 million for departmental endowment

Typically, Busuttil is moving at warp speed to accomplish his goals. He’s appointed seven high-powered committees, one of which he heads (the one charged with raising $50 million—he’s already got $5 million) while he works closely with the others.

In an academic environment where administrators often are known for moving slowly, Busuttil is an anomaly.

“His nickname as a resident was ‘The Flash,’” says Dr. Jonathan Hiatt, a surgeon who met Busuttil 27 years ago and has worked closely with him for most of the time since then. “He gets things done quickly because he’s economical, efficient and focused. I call his style ‘purposeful aggressiveness.’ People draft off his excellence. He’s the guy you’d follow into a fire.”

A professor of surgery in liver and pancreatic transplantation, Hiatt says Busuttil has made the liver transplant program at UCLA “one of the best in the world.”

“He built the program against the odds,” Hiatt says. “He’s like a guy who built a go-cart in his garage and flew it to the moon. It’s arguably one of the most successful liver transplant programs in the world, and he built it single-handedly with his own skill and determination.”

The first liver transplant was performed at UCLA in 1984. Each year, UCLA surgeons perform about 200 liver transplants, placing the program first in the nation for the last 10 years.

Since 1984, Busuttil has performed about 3,000 liver transplants himself. Under his leadership, UCLA’s program innovated the in-situ split-liver procedure, in which a single donor organ can be divided and transplanted into two patients, expanding the available organs for transplant. UCLA, in fact, is the national leader in that procedure.

Dr. Thomas Starzl of the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, known as the modern-day father of trans-
plantation, trained Busuttil. Starzl had high praise for his for-
mer student—as a surgical resident learning transplantation,
as a mentor and leader at UCLA now, and as a standout
among his peers internationally.

“I would score Ron Busuttil with a 10 on a scale of 10 in
all areas,” Starzl says.

Busuttil may be going Mach 2 most of the time, but
liver transplant recipient Donald Wolf says that
one place he doesn’t hurry is with his patients.

“I knew he was considered one of, if not the best, liver
transplant surgeon in the world, but I never expected him to
be so compassionate and down to earth,” says Wolf, a 72-
year-old West Los Angeles resident and partner of B & D
Management Co. who received a liver transplant under
Busuttil’s care in April of 2000. “He always made me feel
good. He was never in a hurry or in a rush when he saw me.
We felt we could ask all the questions we wanted to and he
let me know I could call him anytime.”

Wolf needed a liver transplant because the hepatitis he
contracted after receiving tainted blood during surgery in
1969 later caused liver cancer. He characterized Busuttil as
“everything you’d want your doctor to be.”

“I feel like our family made a great friend,” Wolf says. “He
was terrific to my wife and children. If you mention the name
of Busuttil around them, they’ll bow down, I can tell you that.”

Liver transplant recipient Jackie Colleran didn’t meet
Busuttil until after she awoke from a coma nine days after
her 1996 surgery. Her first memory of him was when he
came to check on her soon after she regained consciousness.

“When I saw him for the first time he was being followed
by a flock of white jackets. I knew he must be the
boss, because none of the people in the white jackets were
looking at me. They were all looking at him,” says Colleran,
a 64-year-old Thousand Oaks resident. “He asked them for
suggestions as to why I was not thriving and he was getting
all sorts of complicated responses. He finally turned and
looked at me, winked, and told the white jackets that all I
needed was a blood transfusion. He said to me, ‘You’re just a
couple of quarts low,’ and he grinned at me and left.”

And, of course, he was right. Colleran received a trans-
fusion and felt better almost immediately.

Colleran describes Busuttil as amazing, and says he
remembers all his patients and greets them by name when he
passes them in the hospital hallways, no matter how long ago
their transplants were.

“He’s very warm with his patients,” she says. “The feel-
ing that you get from him is that he is still very much enjoy-
ing his job and loving the work that he does. That does a lot
to help motivate his patients. They want to be well for him.”

At work and at home, Busuttil is a happy man. He loves
what he does, does it extraordinarily well, and is devoted to
his family.

“When he comes home he’s almost always whistling,”
says his wife of 36 years, JoAnn.

They live in a spacious Westwood home cared for by
JoAnn.

“There’s a division of labor,” she says. “I don’t ask him to
make decisions about the home or children, he doesn’t ask
me to make decisions about his work.”

The “children” are Amber, a corporate tax lawyer, and
Ashley, a second-year medical resident at UCLA.

“He idolizes his daughters,” JoAnn says. “He’s devoted
to his family.”

When he’s not working, Busuttil goes on bike
rides with friends and family or relaxes by
the pool reading the New York Times and the
Los Angeles Times. He plays tennis on their home court or
takes a long jog. He also loves to barbecue, JoAnn says.

“He’s the king of the bar-
bbecue,” she says.

Busuttil has come a very
long way.

His first American home
was a dirt-floored hut on
the edge of a Florida orange
grove. He hadn’t always lived
like that.

“My Italian mother and
Maltese father came from
cotton merchant families
living an upper-class life in
Alexandria, Egypt, until the
political turmoil of 1950,
when basically all Europeans
were asked to leave the coun-
try,” Busuttil says.

An only child, Busuttil and his parents arrived in
America with a few hundred
dollars and their clothes. They barely spoke English.

So they all went to school. Busuttil’s father soon got a job washing cars for a Hertz car rental agency. Within a decade, he was Hertz’ area manager. And 16 years after coming to America, he owned a Toyota agency.

Meanwhile, Busuttil was busy getting top grades in school. He knew where he was going. In the eighth grade he wrote an essay titled, “I Want to be a Surgeon.” In high school, he got top grades, made the basketball and track teams, and still wanted to be a surgeon.

On a partial scholarship at Loyola University in New Orleans, he studied under John Mullahy, chair of the Biological Sciences Department and a teacher who had a profound effect on Busuttil. Mullahy put great emphasis on undergraduate research, and that emphasis was made to order for Busuttil.

“I worked on inflammation produced by lysosomes,” Busuttil recalls. “My research sought to find a way to stabilize the lysosomes membranes so they don’t accelerate inflammation in the body. And you know what? I’m still working on similar projects, though much expanded and more sophisticated, and related to transplanted organs.”

Later he attended Tulane Medical School, again on scholarship, and graduated in 1971 with a medical degree and a master’s degree in pharmacology.

Busuttil first came to UCLA as an intern in 1971, then returned to Tulane to earn a doctorate degree in pharmacology. During his two stints at Tulane, Busuttil worked with Dr. Elmo Cerise, a surgeon who ran a program that brought medical students into the operating room to work with him, an experience Busuttil describes as “a phenomenal opportunity to really taste what surgery was all about.”

“It told me that surgery was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life,” Busuttil says.

In 1975, Busuttil returned to UCLA to finish his surgical residency, which he completed in 1978. Dr. Thomas Calcaterra, a UCLA head and neck surgeon for 34 years and a professor emeritus of surgery, remembers Busuttil from his first years at UCLA and watched him develop into an excellent surgeon with a bedside manner that—literally—wows his patients.

“He’s extremely bright and articulate with a vast knowledge of medicine,” says Calcaterra, who retired in July. “He almost has the answer before you can even finish the question. His mind works at cosmic speed. He’s technically gifted, right off the charts, and he’s always able to remain cool and composed in the direst life and death circumstances.”

Throughout the years, Calcaterra and Busuttil treated a number of patients together, and Calcaterra says the patients always “came away awed.”

“He inspires great confidence,” Calcaterra says. “He’s decisive, and he helps patients make the right treatment decisions.”

Calcaterra has no doubt that Busuttil will succeed in making the UCLA Department of Surgery the best in the nation.

“He is an inspired leader,” Calcaterra says. “He’s universally looked up to as a surgeon and he really wants to make the department No. 1 in the country. I think he can do it. He knows what has to be done. These are tough times in medicine, with lean budgets, but I think he’s got the path defined pretty well.”

Busuttil describes leading the surgery department as “the ultimate challenge,” and the “capstone of one’s career.”

But he’s not leaving the operating room anytime soon. “I love going in the OR,” Busuttil says. “I get enormous gratification from saving somebody’s life. When I took this job, it was on the condition that I could continue being a surgeon. That’s the one thing I know I do really well.”

TRIBUTE TO THE AUTHOR

John Dreyfuss, the author of the accompanying profile on Dr. Ronald Busuttil, passed away after an acute illness at age 70 on August 21, 2004, before he was able to complete the article. A former colleague at UCLA’s Jonsson Cancer Center, Kim Irwin, completed the assignment, adding to John’s almost completed story, primarily using the transcribed notes John had taken from interviews with sources. The consummate professional, John called the editor often—including from his hospital bed when he was extremely ill—to give an update on his story, to ask for more “words” so he could make the story longer, and to share his enthusiasm and admiration for what he had learned about Dr. Busuttil.

We are honored to print his final story.

John was a warm, gregarious man with a charming wit, who served as a mentor for many young writers. Not surprisingly, John—who personified the term “people-person”—relished the opportunity to write profiles about UCLA personalities, and he did so with the same zest he lived his own life. In his retirement years, John and his wife, Kit, had taken many bike trips on their tandem bike, traveling through Colorado and Australia, among their many adventures.

John served as public information director and then director of planning and communications at UCLA’s Jonsson Cancer Center from 1995-2000. Prior to that, he had a 27-year career with the Los Angeles Times, where he at various times worked as a higher education reporter, the architecture and design critic, and a features writer.

John is survived by his wife, Katharine (“Kit”), son James, and three daughters, Karen, Katharine and Kimberly, and five grandchildren. A memorial to honor his life was held at UCLA on November 14, 2004.