Transcending cut-and-dry data with artistic passion and intuition makes Dr. Ezriel Kornel a better surgeon. By Melissa F. Pheterson

Petite motor skills, creative intuition, and performance under pressure can describe an artist as aptly as they do a surgeon. For Ezriel Kornel, MD, FACS, the skills required to remove brain tumors and replace damaged cervical discs thrive symbiotically with artistic talent and passion. Not surprisingly considering Kornel, the director of the Institute for Neurosciences at Mount Kisco’s Northern Westchester Hospital and principal of Brain & Spine Surgeons of New York in West Harrison, also happens to be a violin virtuoso, poet, actor, and artist.

A Bedford resident, Kornel has a credible artistic CV. He studied violin in college and has performed at Carnegie Hall, the Kennedy Center, and with the North Shore Philharmonic. (“As a violinist, I always focused on dexterity and fine motor control. That translated nicely into surgery.”) He’s also acted in Off-Off Broadway productions and community theater in Westchester, experiences that he says bolster his performance in the operating theater and make him “keenly aware” that, ultimately, each surgery is unique.

The other thing the performing arts do for Kornel, he says, is remind him to recruit that “certain intuition or imagination” that transcends medical textbooks. “When you’re involved in music, writing, or performing, you have to trust that ideas will come through another ‘port’ and trust there are understandings that come from places you may not anticipate,” he explains. “So it’s more than just knowing that ‘It’s Symptom A, so it’s Diagnosis B,’ and it’s more than just intuition. It comes from ‘knowledge-plus’: that indefinable combination of life, learning, and openness to letting things percolate.”

Kornel also writes poetry, to grapple with patients who have moved him profoundly. “The reason I write poetry is that it comes from, and brings out, a different place of understanding — one that’s not directly scientific,” explains Kornel, who plans to publish a volume of his work.

The same instinct inspired his collage of objects in Plexiglas from the rubble, ash, and artifacts he recovered from Ground Zero during his time as a volunteer in the aftermath of 9/11. This work of art has been displayed at the Bedford Historical Society, Northern Westchester Hospital, and Mount Kisco Library.

“At the heart of it, most artists have some deeper ability or desire to deeply connect with people,” he says. “Good physicians have that ability: to connect with their patients in a deeper way, which is important not only in helping someone to get well but also in cases of terminal illness.”

Because of — not despite — his 12-hour workdays, Kornel says he will always make an effort to pursue his artistic side: “Engaging that part of my brain fulfills me as a human being and makes me a better physician.”