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# Getting to know: Joe Niamtu

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Posted: Sunday, October 16, 2016 10:30 pm



ALEXA WELCH EDLUND

**Dr. Joe Niamtu** is an award-winning cosmetic facial surgeon who established his practice in 1983. He and his wife, April, have two special-needs sons and are active in numerous charitable organizations. He is from Canton, Ohio.

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## How long have you lived in the Richmond region?

Dr. Joe Niamtu, Thursday, September 20, 2012.

I moved here in 1980 for my maxillofacial surgery residency at what was then the Medical College of Virginia (now the VCU School of Medicine). There were training programs in all states, but MCV had one

of the premiere programs. I had previously done an internship in Charlotte and liked the weather a bit south of Ohio. I had planned to return to Ohio, but I guess the region, the resources and the charm of Southern culture made me consider staying here. I developed a large circle of friends from my four years at MCV, so the choice was pretty easy.

## Where do you live now, and what drew you there?

When I was at MCV in the early 1980s, I attended a party at a house on Cherokee Road on the James River. That day, my new goal was to live in that area. In 1986, I moved on the James and enjoy it immensely. It is one of Richmond's best-kept and underdeveloped secrets.

## Why did you choose your profession or avocation?

I knew I wanted to do something with science, and in high school I asked some local facial surgeons if I could observe. I watched them perform facial reconstruction of a young girl with facial fractures. That day, I knew I wanted to do that.

I saw this girl in peril and her worried and scared parents. I thought it was amazing that only a small group of people had the training and talents to treat her. I thought it would be amazing to be one of those few.

I had never seen general anesthesia, and when they started the IV and administered

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Discover Richmond: August 2016

## It's The Dog Days Of Summer, So We Say ... Woof!

Of course, we love all sorts of animals, so we also cast a spotlight on some less predictable non-human friends – including horses, snakes and lemurs (yes, lemurs). But we scratch Fido behind the ears by looking at cool activities for dogs and their owners – plus other features with a canine twist.

Switching gears, we get the inside track on some of the logistics – and humorous surprises – that are part of staging a NASCAR race. And with Tim Kaine's vice presidential nomination, we look back at how his kinship with Barack Obama elevated both of them, and Virginia, in 2008 and earlier.

For nature lovers, we highlight a dozen less-heralded spots that are worth a visit. On the food side, we explore historical flavor from Colonial Williamsburg. And getting back to animals, we note a different way of revering them – by not consuming them: We tempt you with tasty treats that can satisfy vegans and nonvegans alike.

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some drugs, they had the ability to cut on her face and rearrange her facial skeleton. I was mesmerized with that entire experience. The girl emerged from surgery, and I will never forget the excitement and the emotions of her tearful parents thanking the surgeons. I thought, what a great talent to be able to assist someone in this amount of injury and distress.

#### **What five words would describe you?**

Energetic, passionate, driven, humorous, sympathetic.

#### **If a visitor asked you for three things to do while in town, what would you recommend?**

See the river – I am extremely passionate about the James and feel it literally made Richmond what it is. Everything about this city has or had something to do with the beautiful James. Also, eat in the Fan, Shockoe Bottom or downtown. And visit the museums.

#### **What's something you haven't done locally that's on your to-do list?**

The Segway tour.

#### **What's an ideal weekend for you?**

Spending time fishing at my farm in Cumberland and taking my special-needs sons swimming in our pool in the summer. It is the only time we can be upright and face to face. Also, eating Sunday dinner on my boat on the James during sunset.

#### **What's at the top of your bucket list?**

There is not much I haven't done on my list of goals. I publish and lecture a lot on cosmetic facial surgery. I have spoken on six continents but haven't been to Japan – need to do that.

#### **What skill would you like to master?**

I play and have collected guitars for 30 years, but I am not really very good. Never enough time to really learn it. I would love to become accomplished on the guitar and learn to play piano.

There is something mystical about guitars, even if you don't play them. For a simple instrument, the fretboard is a complex system of music that makes you wish you had 20 fingers. Fine guitars are made of exotic wood, and you can smell the spruce of a vintage guitar. To me they are art, and I have them hanging in numerous rooms in my house. I guess growing up with rock 'n' roll, the guitar is an icon of my generation.

#### **What's the best present you ever received, and what made it meaningful?**

My sons have severe disabilities, and they can't walk or talk. They rarely make eye contact, but every once in a while, I get eye contact and a smile. It melts me.

Every expectant father dreams of having sons, teaching the mysteries of life – how to catch a fish, throw a football (and maybe do a face-lift). Your dreams come to a cataclysmic crash when you find out that your child will never walk or talk, and will always be tube-fed and in diapers. There are no words to describe this crushing

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Discover Richmond: June 2016

### **It' Summer, So Here's To Sunshine - And Good Health!**

The Richmond region has a vibrant and varied health and medical presence, and for the new Discover Richmond, we look at 20 pieces of this diverse puzzle. There's a little nature (a healing garden) and a little nurture (yep, diapers), plus lots of interesting items in between.

Switching gears, we eavesdrop on an insightful, humorous conversation between two longtime players in the art and food scenes. We spend a day with a Kroger store manager, getting a glimpse into her professional life and her astounding commitment at home.

With an appetite for history, we explore some flavor with, yes, a faux-food artisan. We also revisit the surprisingly active car manufacturing scene in Richmond and Virginia in the early 20th century, and we look back a bicentennial brouhaha in 1976.

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blow. Only other parents who have experienced this can understand. We had it happen twice, with both sons.

When you experience this, you think about all the things that your sons will never do, and the list is endless. It is very, very sad. The only thing you can do is to provide them love and appreciate the love they show you. My wife, April, is a hero. Sometimes I don't think she knows they have severe disabilities. She dresses them like normal kids, takes them to movies and dresses them up on Halloween. My sons have had 40 surgeries, and we have spent countless hours in hospitals and emergency rooms. My wife has slept in ICUs for weeks on end. That is true love.

Parents of disabled children are tough – there is no other word to explain it. So that little smile I get from my boys goes miles to make me happy. As they say, you can't control the wind, so you have to adjust your sails. Life is fragile. When I leave the house in the morning and kiss them, they make me tough, they give me drive, and that carries over to all aspects of my life.

### **What is the craziest thing you've ever done, and would you do it again?**

April and I jumped through the waterfalls and walked under Boshers Dam. I had heard of people doing that and was a bit intrigued (and stupid at the time), so we gave it a shot and joined the club. Not again!

### **Pick a year or an event to go back to. What would it be?**

1983. It was the year I went into practice. Fourteen years of education after high school all came together, and it was time for me to begin using my skills. The sheer energy of getting out of training and opening an office was exciting. Everyone I loved was alive. I was physically at the top of my game with fitness.

### **Tell us about something you own that has great sentimental value to you.**

My dad is 92 and a World War II veteran. In August 1995, I took him to Normandy, and we stood on the beach where the D-Day landing crafts made landfall. My dad lost many friends in WWII, and seeing all of the U.S. graves was very emotional. I picked up a seashell and wrote the place and date on it. It will always remind me of that emotion.

### **If you could spend a day with a fictional or historical figure, who would it be?**

This probably sounds crazy, but it would be Sir Paul McCartney. I have always been a Beatlemaniac. He was the leader of a force that changed the world. I would love to talk to him about it. Historically, I would like to have spent time with Thomas Edison. How the hell did he think of all that?!

### **What's your fondest childhood memory?**

In Canton, Ohio, there was an amusement park called Meyers Lake. It had coasters, rides and games. We used to go there as a family and thought it was Disneyland. All was right in the world then.

### **Of your five senses, what's your favorite?**

Sight! My profession is cosmetic facial surgery, and I appreciate the beauty of the human face, the beauty of the lush green of Virginia, the beauty of my wife and the



Discover Richmond: April 2016

### **Hungry? Hope So.**

For the new Discover Richmond, we got to thinking about the incredible – and tasty – breadth of our burgeoning food scene. So enjoy a feast for the eyes and stomach: We're spotlighting 26 local restaurant "fave" dishes.

And for some wine and wanderlust, we offer tastings and pairings – as in, a glimpse at some admired wineries around the state, plus cool destinations to check out while you're nearby.

We also look back – at Virginia on the cusp of World War I and at the height of major presidential campaign – and we hit the trail (by bike, no less – check out our misadventure).

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beauty of the James River that runs by my home.

### What habit would you like to change?

I probably wish I could relax more. I always have to be doing something or I feel I am wasting the moment. That is why I can't play golf, because I can get 15 things done in the time it takes to play 18 holes.

### What's your "desert island" book, CD, TV program and/or movie?

I am very involved in academics and spend more time writing books than reading them. I rarely watch TV as, again, it saps my productivity. Starting several years ago, April and I have put an hour aside before bed to watch TV series. "Sons of Anarchy," "Breaking Bad," "Game of Thrones," "Orange is the New Black," "Homeland," "Mad Men" and "House of Cards" – I really enjoy this hour.

### How has your impression of the Richmond region changed in your time here?

Richmond is now hip! When I moved here in 1980, it was sort of a lazy, sultry, old Southern city. Simply a cooler place now, but it can be a lot cooler if we could get past our past and work on the future. We need a major airline hub, we have the beautiful James – which is totally undeveloped compared with riverwalks in other cities. Our city needs to focus more on infrastructure (streets, services and maintenance) and less on outside interests.

### Tell us a story – about anything at all – that makes you think about your time in the Richmond region.

I moved here in 1980 and did not know a single soul. Now I have thousands of friends and have become pretty well-known in this city. I can remember my very first patient, and now I have an internationally recognized practice and see patients from all over the world. It all happened here, in Richmond, one patient at a time!

My main drive is my practice, and I love making people look as young as they feel. Richmond has been very good to me, and in return I have given much back to the city in terms of pro bono work and charity involvement. I have lectured and traveled all over the world, but when I look out the window of the plane and see the serpentine outline of the James River, I know I am almost home.

Posted in [Discover Richmond](#), Disco-rich-body on Sunday, October 16, 2016 10:30 pm.

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Discover Richmond: February 2016

As we roll into 2016, Discover Richmond is excited to expand its reach and touch on history, people, food, lifestyles, travel, the arts – the topics you've told us you like.

In this issue, we look beyond our local boundaries and spotlight great adventures within easy grasp of our central location. From cool destinations within a roughly 100-mile radius of the area, to great camping, to relaxing B&Bs and restaurant picks, we give you some ideas as you think about springtime travel.

We also look back at fascinating pieces of our political and social history, and for modern flavor, we check in with local chefs, touch base with a hotel insider and music impresario – and even delve into the science of spit.

Enjoy the journey!

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