

**Introduction Guest (Unknown):**

Welcome to this episode of the BCEN and Friends podcast. Today's guest is Ken Dion. Ken's impressive life and work experience transcends from paramedic to nurse to entrepreneur to innovator. The common thread for this journey is lifelong learning to reach your full potential while helping nurses advance their ideas to impact the quality of patient care. Our hosts today are Brigid Flood, director of strategy and operations at BCEN, and Mark Eggers, manager of Education and Technology Services at BCEN. Brigid, Mark, take it away.

**Brigid Flood:**

Hello and welcome to the BCEN and Friends podcast, where we hold interesting conversations around learning with a range of thought leaders BCEN certification holders and industry professionals, but most importantly, to create value and insight for you, our professional nurses across the emergency spectrum. We hope you find our discussions interesting, informative, sometimes funny, sometimes serious, but always valuable. I'm Brigid Flood, director of strategy and operations here at BCEN, and I'm joined by my co-host, Mark Eggers, manager of Education and Technology Services. Hey, Mark.

**Mark Eggers:**

Hi, Brigid.

**Brigid Flood:**

So, Mark, today, we have this great guest joining us. He's Dr. Ken Dion and talk about a lifelong learner. Ken has this amazing 40-year career path in the health care industry, starting out as an emergency nurse, and now currently is the assistant dean for business innovation and strategic relationships at Johns Hopkins and also president elect of Sigma. As a nurse, entrepreneur, inventor and scholar, Ken brings nontraditional but highly value-added expertise to identifying and advancing business opportunities within nursing, locally, nationally and internationally. In 1999, Dr. Dion founded Decisions Critical Inc., a cloud-based startup information systems company to meet the education compliance, incompetency development needs of health care organizations. He was awarded a patent for Critical Portfolio, a first of its time application and critical staffer, a reverse stacking system. In 2012, his company was acquired by Health Stream, where Ken served as vice president and chief of Nursing Informatics. Later, he founded **TurnPath**, a health care technology incubator. He is a Virginia Henderson, Billy Brown and Sigma fellow. He earned his bachelor's degree in nursing at the University of Central Florida and his MBA MSM and doctorate in nursing systems at the University of Texas at Austin. Ken, welcome to BCEN and Friends.

**Dr. Ken Dion:**

Thank you, Brigid. Very nice to be here with you and Mark today.

**Brigid Flood:**

So, did I miss anything when I introduced you?

**Dr. Ken Dion:**

No, ma'am. I think that was way too long of an introduction. Ken Dion, very proud nurse, usually works very well.

**Brigid Flood:**

You know what? Next time I'm going to check with you.

**Dr. Ken Dion:**

I'm just kidding. Great introduction. And no, Brigid, you didn't miss anything. Thank you very much for taking the time to go over my pedigree.

**Brigid Flood:**

Yeah. And I think this is exactly where I wanted to start, which is you just had such an interesting journey from being a nurse in the emergency department to where you're at today at Johns Hopkins. So, can you tell us a little bit about that journey itself?

**Dr. Ken Dion:**

I'd be happy to. Actually, it was not planned in any way and actually, I have to start a little bit before my nursing career when I was in high school growing up in Miami. I was having my challenges. In some classes, I did very, very well to the point I was almost bored and then other classes, I struggle. I actually wound up dropping out of high school, getting my GED and at 16 years old, going away from Miami, the big city of Miami, to a tiny school in North Carolina to start my undergraduate studies at 16 years old. It was a little bit overwhelming and a big culture shock. I actually wound up dropping out again and heading back to Miami, maturing a couple of years and then heading off to Gainesville, Florida, where I actually attained my paramedic certificate first. And so, I worked as a firefighter paramedic for a number of years and realized that I wasn't living to my full potential. I loved health care. I loved helping people. I did love the fire service. But I knew that there was more that I could do with the skills that I have. So as crazy as it sounded to my peers at the fire department, because that's a very coveted job. I mean, one day on, two days off, great benefits, great retirement. They thought I was nuts when I quit the fire department and went back to school to pursue my nursing career at the University of Central Florida. But I was really, really passionate about patient care. So, I went to UCF and started working on my nursing degree and as so often does, the door open, somebody came to me and said, "Ken, you should get involved with the Student Nurses Association" and I had no idea what that was, but I said, "OK, sounds great." I will save that story for another day but wound up because of that door opening, getting very involved with the Student Nurses Association, wound up filling the role of secretary treasurer at the national level and that's a very long and interesting story. We'll save for another time. But through that experience, got exposed to business a little bit as well and one of my mentors at that time said, "Ken, when you go back to get your graduate degree" and you notice I said when, not if, that mentor said to me, "You should pursue a joint

MSM MBA,” and so, I did that at the point in time and actually my goal was to be the best director of an emergency room there ever was. That was the reason I wanted my MBA. I wanted to understand the business side as well as the nursing side so that I could be a great nursing leader in the emergency department that I eventually would land in. It was wonderful, great education doing that program in Texas but during that period of time, I was exposed to both consulting and entrepreneurship. So, upon graduation, rather than going into the emergency room, I wound up actually going to work for an information system consulting firm and this was the late 1990s, mid to late 90s, when organizations were just starting to select and implement electronic medical records. So, I was far away my nursing skills and my background to help these organizations improve patient care through delivering EMRs and it was so funny because people would say to me, “Well, Ken, let me understand this. You're a nurse with an MBA and you're working in technology. What does that mean?” I said, “It means I'm trilingual.” I talk to the end users about what they need to solve their problems. Then I go to the tech people and talk to them in tech, talk about what we're gonna go build and then I go to the CFO and explain to him in the language of accounting as to how he is going to get his return on investment on this product that we're going to implement. So, that's how I use that degree and I worked a lot while I was in the consulting field and I realized that I still needed more education. So, I thought it would be a great idea to both start my PhD and start a company at the same time. One of the things that consulting does teach for you, rather, if you have the opportunity to be a consultant, is you get exposed to a lot of different opportunities and in the course of that, I realized that there was a gap in the marketplace. We had all of this data about our patients and we knew not a lot more than they had a license and a CPR card about the providers who were taking care of them. I'm a firm believer in the synergy model that if you match the characteristics with the patient, with the characteristics of the nurse, you're going to have the best patient outcome. So, with that belief, I realized we really needed that data about our providers and that's what caused me to launch *Decision Critical*. So, I ran that company while getting my PhD. They both took over 10 years to finish. *Decision Critical* the transaction and health stream; my PhD eventually being finished up as well and after the transaction was taking a little bit of time to get a little bit of life back, if you will, because running a startup takes about 20 to 24 hours or 28 hours a day. So, when that was finally done with, I was regrouping and taking a little time get reacquainted my family when Dean Davidson at Johns Hopkins called me and said, “Ken, would you consider coming to Johns Hopkins?” And I said, “Well, Dean, that's an amazing offer but if you look at my CD, it's probably not a Hopkins Researcher CD. I do not have a program of research. I have been an entrepreneur.” And she said, “That's exactly the reason that we want you to come to Johns Hopkins.” Nurses are innovators. They have all the great ideas and so often those ideas are co-opted for lack of a better word by people who will take them to market, who have the business skills. So, one of my passion coming to the end of this long story is about helping nurses advance their ideas to impact the quality

of patient care that we're delivering in the United States and so that's why I went to Hopkins to deliver on a promise that I made both to myself and to one person in the world who challenged me when I went to get my PhD and they said, "Ken, you've got two terminal degrees. Why are you taking up a valuable seat in my class?" And I said, "Because one day this PhD is gonna give me the opportunity to give back to a profession that's been very, very good to me" and that's why I went to Hopkins.

**Brigid Flood:**

Yes. That's really fascinating, and I want to stay there for a little bit because I think I have a two-part question here, which is: you know, it appears when I first started learning about you and now talking with you that, you know, education came very easily to you because you had this long list of degrees and sharing that point about your high school and it took a couple of attempts, right, to kind of get that down. I came to think of our nurses who are either studying for their first certification exam or they're trying to get their CEs to maintain their certifications while juggling all these other things in their life. Do you have any advice for them on that? And then the second part, you can answer it in any way you want. It also appears, and I think you may have said it about doors opening and if you have any thoughts about being opened to actually see those doors? And when you did, how did you know?

**Dr. Ken Dion:**

Sure, sure. Well, I must say that, first of all, as far as challenges learning, you know, I alluded to the fact that I was really good at some things and absolutely pathetic at others. It wasn't until I went to university that I was actually diagnosed with transpositional dyslexia and so that was part of my challenge in learning and nobody had picked up on that. And I can even go back to my childhood and recognize the first time that I knew that something wasn't right. That's another story for another day. So, I guess, you know, the truth is we all have challenges in life. Wanting is not easy. Right. And so, it can be the challenge of trying to homeschool kids in a time of COVID while managing a full-time job. We all have our different challenges in life, and I think that, you know, we can look at those challenges or we can look at those opportunities. Right. When I figured out how my brain was wired, then what I started doing was playing to my strengths. Even though, you know, sometimes I transpose things which I'm very, very careful about, especially when it comes to drug calculations. But then I was really much better at quantitative things than I was at qualitative things. So, I played to my strengths. So, if there are things that are challenging for you, rather than looking for a way to get around them necessarily, figure out how to position them to play to one of your strengths. I think that that's probably one of the best pieces of advice I can give in terms of that. You know, as far as doors opening, we're all fearful of the unknown. Gosh, I mean, in the times we live in today, it's hard to think about what next month is going to look like. Never mind, next year. Right. And, you know, you heard the story of my career path. You know, everyone, when they plan their

career path, it's this beautiful trajectory that goes from point A to point B and they retire and go on to do wonderful things in their retirement. In my career trajectory, quite frankly, was a ball of twine and the great thing about that ball of twine is that there were all these intersections that happen where the twine touches somewhere else. Right. And so, for me, that was the beauty of walking through doors. Right. Every time I walk through a door, I meet a new group of people. I have a new experience and it's just amazing how someone I thought who you know, I don't want to say that person was insignificant, but maybe had not, I didn't see them as being a major player in my life on down the road, turned out to be because that ball of twine limped back around to them again because I walked through a door. So, I think that, you know, that's how we grow. If we're not growing and we're not continually learning, then what's the point of being here? You know, we used to have a sign in our office that said, "You know, if you're not living life on the edge, you've taking up too much space." You know?

**Brigid Flood:**

Right.

**Dr. Ken Dion:**

And so that's kind of where I live and why I think these things are important.

**Brigid Flood:**

I thank you for that. That's great. You know, I personally learned in college I only have a 15-minute attention span. So, if I sit there and try to study for an hour, it doesn't do me any good. Fifteen minutes I get up, I do something else and then come back and I study much better in it. I agree with you Ken. You've got to learn your style and what works for you and then the other thing about the doors for me personally is, you know, sometimes when you have an opportunity to try something new, you know, it seems like you're jumping off a cliff. And I have to remind myself, I'm really just probably jumping off the curb. It's not a big deal and you tend you have to get over that. So, I really thank you for that answer. I think it will mean a lot to a lot of people.

**Dr. Ken Dion:**

My pleasure.

**Brigid Flood:**

Mark.

**Mark Eggers:**

You've done so many things Ken, so exciting, so many adventures, I mean, you have so much experience. So, let me ask a question outside of clinical skills, what's the biggest areas that nurses today should be focusing on?

**Dr. Ken Dion:**

You know, this is how I wound up in academia, which is some place I thought that I would never be and the real story behind my first exposure to academia was around a very, very similar question, Mark. I was actually invited to an alumni panel at the University of Texas and people in different careers that weren't in clinical were asked to speak about their backgrounds and things and I got this question as the panelist. It wasn't an alumni weekend. It was actually a parent's weekend and so, they were there with their students who had just joined that nursing class and I said to him, "You know, if your students have one free elective, you should send them over to the business school to take a business survey class because they're going to go possibly from making a baby sitter, excuse me, a baby sitter salary to sixty seventy thousand dollars a year and yet, we haven't put the tools in their toolkit to how to manage their money." Right, and so, I know in the United States, we hate to talk about health care as a business, but quite frankly, it is one of the largest businesses in the United States and industries. Right. So I think the one piece of advice I can give folks if they want to expand their learning outside of clinical, I would look at opportunities to learn a little bit more about business, because as you advance throughout your health care career, there are going to be opportunities for you to have input. Right. And this is this, again, is one of my passions. You know, how often as nurses do, we get stuck working with some sorry product? And it's because the people who invented the product didn't engage the nurses in the conversation to build the product. So, nurses have to be at the table to have the conversation. And you know what? Don't wait to be invited to the table. Bring a chair and sit yourself down at the table. Add your input but I can tell you one thing, A CFO or a businessperson is never going to learn the language of nursing. They're not going to understand about patient outcomes. Right. They're not going to understand health care disparities, but they are going to understand the language of business, which is finance. So, I would encourage anyone who wants to influence health care in this country or globally to learn to speak the language of business.

**Mark Eggers:**

Excellent. Thank you. I appreciate that. I've got another question for you, Ken. So, as you know, emergency nurses are the last ones to take care of themselves and you were talking about, you know, yes, I do like those. I go from A to B... but it was a ball twine in all different directions, and we said a lot with nurses also. How do you personally say to yourself and build up your mental health?

**Dr. Ken Dion:**

You know, you're absolutely right, Mark. You have to make time for yourself and whatever it is, that thing that you love. Right. It might be sitting on the couch watching football. It might be knitting. It might be going on a hike and doing something healthy and that refreshes your mind. Steve Jobs said that he had his most amazing ideas when he was out on walks. So, I do those types of things. I don't knit. I will admit that. But I do sit on the couch some Sundays and watch some football, but I do try and do the things to take care of myself. One of

my passions is guitar. Right? So, you have to make time for the things that you love, because those are the things that you renew that renew you. You know, one of the other things that I've adopted recently is 'Technology Free Saturdays,' which is really hard because I love college football even more than pro football but I'm really trying to stay true to my 'Technology Free Saturdays' and that means turning off the cell phone unless there's something really life and death going on with the family. You know, and my colleagues know don't expect an answer from for an email on Saturday. For me, it's just not going to happen. I might answer it on Sunday, but my tech free Saturdays that pull me away from all the technology that we're getting sucked into that allow me to reengage with nature. The world and other human beings are really something that I need to do for me personally. So whatever that thing is that works for you, that renews you whatever you do, make time to do it, even if it means you have to put that time on your calendar and block your calendar so somebody else doesn't slam a meeting into it. Take that time for yourself. You've earned it.

**Mark Eggers:**

Good and Ken, you know, I've heard so many times, "You don't take care yourself, you can't take care of others," so you got to take care yourself first. I agree. Very good. Thank you. Well, Brigid, what else do you have?

**Brigid Flood:**

Well, we're at that place, and it's my favorite point of our podcast, which is rapid fire questions and Ken, this shouldn't feel like a test, but we'll have a series of questions for you. So, I'm going to start. And who is Jeffrey McDogface?

**Dr. Ken Dion:**

Jeffrey McDogface, very, very special being in my life. Jeffrey McDogface is our two-year-old wirehaired miniature Doxa. He's going to have his birthday coming up on October the 9<sup>th</sup>, in a couple of weeks. Jeffrey is on Instagram. You can follow him @Jeffreymcdogface. And he's got some really cute videos and pictures. So, if you need something to brighten your day, Jeffrey McDogface places that Jörg face is a good place to go.

**Brigid Flood:**

I'm gonna follow him. So, second rapid fire question. What would you be doing if you weren't doing what you're doing now?

**Dr. Ken Dion:**

You know, it'd be easy to say that I'd be doing one of those things like playing guitar or being out on hikes and, you know, certainly I will do a good deal of that in my retirement. But I think one of the things that I will never stop doing is trying to make the world a better place. That's why I chose nursing as a profession, because nurses are all about making the world a better place. And if we don't make the world a better place which I must say is usually the harder road. Right. It's it it's easy to take the easy path. Doing the right thing is usually the hard

thing to do. But if we don't make the world a better place, then evil will win out over good. And there's so much good in the nursing profession and so much good in the world that we need to focus on that and make the world a better place. So that's what I'll be doing.

**Brigid Flood:**

Good answer.

**Mark Eggers:**

Ken, another rapid fire question for you. So, you know, we have bumps along the way. So, what's your advice on how to avoid the bumps?

**Dr. Ken Dion:**

Well, you know, I guess, Mark, you're right, some bumps can be avoided. There are those bumps in life that are never going to be avoided. And so, we have to just take those on with courage and tenacity. And, you know, there are some bumps in life that maybe could be avoided, but maybe it's worth not avoiding them sometimes because we all know that, you know, what we learn from is from our mistakes, not from our successes. Right. So those are the things that I remember, my failures and my mistakes.

And so, I think in that in terms of avoiding the bumps or maybe not having as great an impact by the bumps is to have great mentors, you know, and there's nothing wrong with having more than one mentor. I have several because there's one that really helps me in business that absolutely knows nothing about health care. So, they can ask those very astute, obvious questions that I don't see because I'm too close to the forest and their sea and the trees. So, no matter what the variety, being involved with your mentors is really important. And I think the other thing is being involved in your professional organizations, because that's where you're interacting with peers who are going through exactly the same thing that you are that other people may not understand. So being involved in your professional organization, incredibly important beyond just continuing education. That networking and those things are incredibly valuable. And on that, I'd just like to give a piece of advice. Don't be a member of just one organization. I know dollars are finite and we have to think about how we spread our dollars around. But I think being a member of whatever your specialty organization is makes sense if you're an emergency room nurse, critical care nurse, because those are the folks that are going to, you know, understand the issues you do. There are the organizations that are going to provide the type of CE that you need. But I'd also recommend that you be a member of a broader organization that maybe has a national purview or even an international purview like Sigma, so that you're exposed to all of the big picture issues going on in the nursing world that may not always filter into your nursing specialty organization. So, I would say if you can, be a member of at least two organizations and find yourself some good mentors.



**Mark Eggers:**

You are so right about that, I mean, I'm joined many organizations in my life and sometimes you realize I don't know if I want to or not, but once you get into and become a part of, you learn so many things to find out, so many things you don't find out otherwise. So. Absolutely.

**Dr. Ken Dion:**

Well, Mark, if I go there on that, you're just so spot on. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt, but I think you bring up a very important, important point. It's not only joining the organization; it's getting actively involved in the organization. That's where the true benefit comes.

**Mark Eggers:**

You're right. Absolutely. So, Ken, what's your favorite book on leadership for a book that has inspired you or more than one book, if you need more than one?

**Dr. Ken Dion:**

Actually, my favorite book on leadership is probably an hour long plane ride, and it's called *A Journey into the Heroic Environment: Lessons on Leadership*. Great read. I would definitely recommend picking it up.

**Mark Eggers:**

Excellent. A lot of good information. Thank you so much. Ken, so, if our audience would like to follow you, where can they find you online or what social media sites are you on?

**Dr. Ken Dion:**

So primarily you will find me on Twitter and on LinkedIn @KennethDion, Kenneth Dion on LinkedIn and @KennethDion on Twitter.

**Mark Eggers:**

Great. Thank you.

**Brigid Flood:**

So, Ken, I really do want to thank you for your time for joining us on this episode of the BCEN and Friends. Just a big thank you. And I think I'm going to bring my chair to the next table. I want to be at great advice. And to our listeners, we hope you'll stay tuned as we continue with this series and bring you new and meaningful content and perspectives. If you have a suggestion for an episode or topic, please, please e-mail us at [BCEN@BCEN.org](mailto:BCEN@BCEN.org).

I'm Brigid Flood here with Mark Eggers and on behalf of the entire BCEN team, we thank you, we celebrate for all that you're doing as professional nurses press emergency spectrum. Until next time.