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## News & Features



### When Surgical Skills are Given as Gifts

Many plastic and cosmetic surgeons make a habit of bestowing their remarkable surgical skills as gifts, not only during the holiday season, but throughout the year, especially when disaster strikes. Along the way, some people who receive these gifts go on themselves to make significant contributions.



Eugene Alford, M.D. and plastic surgeon, took one glance at his patient in 2004 and could see right away he was way in over his head.

Dr. Alford, a clinical assistant professor of plastic surgery and dermatology at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, often volunteers his time and skills to Face to Face, a national program that helps domestic violence victims rid their faces of scars, broken noses and other injuries once received at the hands of a supposed loved one.

Dr. Alford was evaluating the massive injuries of Carolyn Thomas, a 34-year-old woman who had been shot in the face by a crazed boyfriend who then shot and killed her mother. Carolyn's injuries, Dr. Alford could see, would require not only his best work and utmost dedication but the help of four other plastic surgeons and at least five operations over about a year. All told, Carolyn's jaw, nose, the roof of her mouth, cheek bones, eye sockets, upper lips and eyelids must be rebuilt by plastic surgery.

Because of the huge facial injuries, Carolyn had to appear in public with a large surgical mask over her face. But once she was able to be up and about, Carolyn agreed to go before any interested group willing to listen and tell her own tragic story along with the warning signs of when a troubled relationship is headed for tragedy. She started at the University of Houston with what was to be a two-week blitz against domestic violence.

She was nervous but did so well she is now acting as the national spokesperson for an anti domestic abuse organization and gives speeches all over the nation. (Carolyn also caught the public's eye when she and Dr. Alford were seen on Oprah in May, 2005.) Currently, Carolyn is still reaching out to abused women nationwide.

"I'm fortunate in doing this type of work because I have a great partner," says Dr. Alford. "The Methodist Hospital here takes part in the Face to Face program and picks up the rest of the tab.

"I volunteer my services because some of my great uncles are physicians and they taught me to give back to the community with pro bono surgery."

Holiday gifts from plastic surgeons have been made for years, but truth be told, most do it all year long. Back in 2001, the American Society of Plastic Surgeons (A.S.P.S.) chose two youngsters, one apiece from Poland and the Dominican Republic, to come to the U.S. where plastic surgeons donated reconstructive surgery. Experts say children with deformities often have two strikes against them because they often face discrimination and ridicule. That, in turn, usually hinders the children from taking part in social and educational activities which is required for normal development. Natalia Salwa, a six-year-old Polish girl, suffered the growth of dark hair moles over 35 percent of her body, including her neck, face and scalp. The teasing and name-calling was nonstop at her school.

"Helping children like Natalia lets me use my skills for those who desperately need reconstructive care," said plastic surgeon Paul LoVerme, M.D. in Verona, New Jersey. The other patient, 17-year-old Amaury from the Dominican Republic, suffered an infection as an infant that stopped growth in his lower jaw. Dallas plastic surgeon Kenneth Salyer, M.D., built the lad a new jaw. After the surgery was complete, Amaury was able to chew food for the first time in his life.

"During the holiday season, it is a particular joy to donate surgery," Dr. Salyer said. "The old saying, 'It is better to give than to receive' is absolutely true. As we give more to these children, we feel we are accomplishing our mission in life - to share our surgical talents with as many children as possible."

Many surgeons get involved in donating surgery as a resident in training and just about all of us love doing it," says Steven H. Dayan, M.D., at the Chicago Center for Facial Plastic Surgery. "I think of it as part and parcel of being a doctor."

Born in Washington, D.C. of Nigerian parents who were visiting the U.S., Dr. Chukwuemeka Onyewu (On-YEH-woo) - now an M.D. and plastic surgeon -- went to high schools in both the U.S. and Nigeria. When he came back to the U.S. and finished American medical schools and residencies in plastic and reconstructive surgery, he started volunteering his services to Nigeria twice yearly, with one stint starting every December 7th. When Dr. Onyewu first reported to a clinic in Nigeria, he found four walls, a floor and little else. Over the years, he and other volunteer physicians furnished the clinic with five complete operating rooms.

"It's purely a gift-giving scenario," says Dr. Onyewu. "The things I do there are so minor in comparison to what I'm trained to do. Yet the outpouring of emotion is overwhelming. A simple, ten minute procedure will have a whole family in tears, hugging you and praying their hearts out for you."



New York plastic surgeon Douglas Monasebian, M.D. founded New York Heals to provide free treatment to victims of domestic violence by doing scar revisions, rhinoplasties, skin resurfacing and, when necessary, emergency facial procedures.

"I can't erase the past, but I can help people face the future with great self-confidence," says Dr. Monasebian who says he started New York Heals as a way to use his training and ability as an aesthetic plastic surgeon to help domestic violence victims heal, both physically and emotionally. He currently operates on 15 to 20 such victims yearly.

Interplast is yet another group of plastic surgeons who travel overseas to delivery free care where it is most needed. In one case, Nguyen Van Ket, a 16-year-old Vietnamese boy with an uncorrected cleft lip walked by himself for several days to reach a hospital where a group of American plastic surgeons were working. In his society, the lad was an outcast because of his deformity with no hope of work or marriage. After his surgery, the medical team watched as he saw his new face in a mirror for the first time His reaction brought tears to the eyes of the surgeons and nurses alike.

That touching scene was captured in a documentary film, A Story of Healing, that won an Oscar for Best Short Documentary

of 1997. Yet another group of caring plastic surgeons, Operation Smile International, has so far helped about 94,000 children in 26 nations. Experts say it often requires as little as 45 minutes to perform a cleft lip surgery that changes a child's life for the better. Yet another volunteer organization for plastic surgeons, R.S.V.P. (Reconstructive Surgeons Volunteer Program) sends hundreds of U.S. plastic surgeons around the globe to donate their services. Most spend weeks away from their practices, pay their own expenses and work in primitive places where they are at risk for contagious diseases or political violence.

Many other surgeons help where they can and when the need strikes. For instance, plastic surgeon Burr von Maur, M.D., of Mission Viejo, California, volunteered his medical services in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi after the Katrina disaster. Not only did he use his skills suturing lacerations and draining abscesses, he also helped cook meals, aided in demolition and visited with evacuees.

The Austin-Weston Center for Cosmetic Surgery in Reston, Virginia, adopted 29 family members - including many children under five -- who were all camped out in one, two-bedroom home during Katrina's aftermath and supplied all their needs for several months.

Darrick Antell, M.D., a New York City plastic surgeon, volunteered his time in Haiti, Ecuador and Mexico in the mid-1980s. "We worked pretty much from dawn until dusk," he says. "There was more surgery than could possibly be done so we had to pick the most severe cases. I think every physician has an obligation to give back to the greater community and to help out in any way he or she can."

Sherri Worth Nourse, D.D.S., a cosmetic and reconstructive dentist in Newport Beach, California, donates time and money to three child help organizations - The Second Harvest Food Bank, Pretend City and Child Help. But one of her favorite philanthropies is a mentor program where she works with a high school senior for a year in her practice.

"I'm thankful for my success and feel strongly about giving back to make a difference in kids' lives so they can have every chance to live a full life."

Just after Leo McCafferty, M.D., started his professional life as a young surgeon in a Florida burn unit, Analliese Barnes, then nine months old, was terribly burned in a house fire and brought to Dr. McCafferty's emergency room. His heart went out to the child because he had a daughter about the same age. At first, it was a matter of saving the toddler's life, but it turned into a life-long relationship between patient and physician. Nonetheless, Dr. McCafferty has never charged Analliese or her family for his services. And when the doctor moved to Pittsburg, the youngster and her family followed.

"Analliese was burned and severely scared on the left side of her body, from the top of her scalp to the tip of her toes," says Dr. McCafferty who has performed 31 plastic surgeries on the now 17-year-old to help correct the burn damage.

"Whatever your profession, there is a way to help people," says Dr. McCafferty.

The irrepressible Analliese, a high school senior, competes on the swim team, works on the yearbook and, with an eye toward working in medicine, speaks to burn victims whenever possible.

"If you are terribly injured, you have to love yourself before others will love you," says Analliese. "Every day is another chance to get better. As for Dr. McCafferty, he is, like, totally awesome."

Darrick Antell, M.D., D.D.S., a New York City plastic surgeon volunteered his time in Haiti in the mid 1980s as a dentist with Interplast, an organization that gives medical services to children overseas. Dr. Antell also traveled to Ecuador and Mexico, donating reconstructive surgery.

He continued the work until he moved to New York for his plastic surgery residency and then his Park Avenue practice. The birth of his own five children put added constraints on his time so he continued volunteering locally with Operation Smile, a program for children who have congenital defects such as a cleft lip or palate.

Increasingly, plastic and cosmetic surgeons show how people make a living by what we get and how we can also make a life by what we give.



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