

Saving Faces – And Lips and Stomachs and Fingers

Haitian Plastic Surgeon Gives Back What Time or Tragedy Takes Away

By Brian Stevens
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MIAMI – In a world where image is everything, Dr. Jhonny A. Salomon can give his patients back what some believe is better than even life itself – their looks and the momentous sense of self-esteem and self-worth attached to image today.

"With an hour or two of surgery you can dramatically change people's lives and that's what is really amazing," Dr. Salomon, 36, said from the South Miami plastic surgery practice where he works modern day miracles on the bodies of men, women and even children.

While the idea of shaping the way in which the world will see someone may sound awe-inspiring, Dr. Salomon seems remarkably at ease with the task and the responsibilities of recasting his patients' appearances in flesh and bone.

"It's challenging yes, but not intimidating," Dr. Salomon said of the thousands of procedures he has performed, including cosmetic surgery like breast augmentation and re-constructive surgery on defects like cleft lips.

His nonchalant approach notwithstanding, Dr. Salomon spoke with great care and even pride in the artistry and creativity he believes are fundamental aspects of plastic surgery – a field of medicine whose popularity is skyrocketing.

About 60 percent of the doctor's surgery workload is cosmetic – usually elective procedures designed to add to, take away from or otherwise alter a patient's body. The remaining 40 percent of cases are re-constructive – rebuilding what is not there, as in the case of a woman who may have lost a breast to cancer.



Dr. Jhonny A. Salomon

mon procedures – liposuction – second only to tumor removal.

Leafing through a photo album full of both before and after patient pictures – many too graphic to show here – Dr. Salomon said liposuction, a process that removes excess fat, is the procedure he performs most often.

Dr. Salomon acknowledged that the juxtaposition of coming from a country where many go without enough to eat on a daily basis and the fact that a majority of his procedures involve liposuction provides a certain element of irony to his work.

The purely cosmetic nature of liposuction, along with a string of high-profile injuries and deaths associated with the practice has raised questions of late among patient advocates and state medical authorities.

For a time last year Florida Department of Health officials issued a temporary ban on cosmetic surgeries like liposuction per-

formed at doctor's offices – instead of hospitals – because of a disturbing increase in injuries and deaths related to non-hospital procedures.

Dr. Salomon, whose own State of Florida records are exemplary, said as with any profession, experience and attention to detail mitigate the potential for medical mistakes.

"In the hands of someone with great experience it's very safe," he said of liposuction, in which a doctor uses a vacuum tube to literally suck out localized fat cells.

After 16 years of medical education and

surgical training – begun in Boston when the teenage would-be doctor moved to the United States with his family at age 17, Dr. Salomon has a history that includes thousands of patients.

This Spring Dr. Salomon will add a cadre of Haitian patients to the already small army of those he has successfully operated on through the years, when he makes a medical mission to Port-au-Prince as a volunteer with Physicians for Peace.

"I want to give back to the place I was born," Dr. Salomon said simply of his reasons for losing what would otherwise be expensive surgical time in the United States, where most plastic surgeons' yearly incomes land anywhere between the low to mid six figures.

Despite his almost 20 years in the United States, Dr. Salomon has maintained his Haitian citizenship.

Plastic surgery is rare in Haiti, and Dr. Salomon hopes to see some of the most critical cases of deformities like cleft lips or cleft palates during his trip home.

"You have to have a critical eye," Dr. Salomon said of plastic surgery – and not just for the physical.

Recognizing that some of his patients in the United States may be looking to cosmetically alter their images for the wrong reasons, Dr. Salomon said playing amateur psychologist comes with the territory of advising potential patients.

"You have to be able to understand a bit of a person's psyche," he said.

"If they are just coming off a divorce or

if they don't really understand the full ramifications of the procedure, then they are not a good candidate for plastic surgery," Dr. Salomon said, adding, "Surgery will change the body – not the soul."

One body Dr. Salomon changed is that of 3-year-old Dimitri Ritz.

When the Broward County boy's finger was cut off in a scooter accident last October, his parents did not know what to do.

"We called 911 and when they got him to the hospital the doctors said there was nothing they could do to save his finger," said Natasha Ritz, Dimitri's mother. "No one could help us."

After a little quick thinking the Ritz's remembered a friend's conversation about Dr. Salomon's work in re-constructive surgery.

"We called our friend who gave us the doctor's number. He was all the way in Key West but he drove back to Miami immediately to do the surgery," Natasha said.

Today Dimitri has the full use of "that beautiful finger," said his mother, who together with her husband is grateful for Dr. Salomon's efforts.

"Thank God his finger is fine. If we didn't have Dr. Salomon, Dimitri might have lost that finger," she said.

Stories like that, Dr. Salomon said, are the joy of his work and propel him to want to keep reshaping and rebuilding people's bodies for a long time to come.

"I hope I never retire," the doctor said.



Before (left) and after reconstructive ear surgery performed by Dr. Salomon. This young boy is only half way through the reconstructive process, the doctor said. Photo/courtesy Dr. Salomon

Figures like those mirror a nationwide trend as more and more people in the United States are seeking out plastic surgery to recreate what time or tragedy has taken away, including Haitians, who make up between 10 and 15 percent of Dr. Salomon's patient roster.

More than 2.5 million patients underwent plastic surgery procedures in 1999, according to figures from the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, of which Dr. Salomon is a member.

Leading the way among the most com-