

The Surgery of Self-Esteem

Dr. Kenneth Salyer gives children, deformed by disease or defect, the gift of normal lives.

Even if you're prepared, some of the more gruesome deformities peering from the images in the surgeon's office cause you to cringe at the intense cruelty of nature gone haywire. In these abnormal faces, mismatched puzzle pieces of missing or malformed skin, muscle, and bone make you forget these are children.

Until you hear the voices. Rising from the video, the children's sweet, innocent voices leave you breathless at the injustice of their twisted fates and faces.

Fortunately, "after" pictures accompany these "before" depictions. Dr. Kenneth Salyer is the force behind the miraculous transformations. "When I look at a face, I see how it's going to be, not how it is," says the 63-year-old founding chairman and director of



the International Craniofacial Institute and Cleft Lip and Palate Treatment Center, Medical City Dallas Hospital.

"What I'm doing is more art than science," the surgeon continues. "I have to take the face apart like a puzzle, then put it back into a normal relationship."

Countless parents put their trust in him, whether it's to repair the relatively simple cleft lip, nose, and palate, or to correct major deformities. The Kansas City native's book-size vita reassures them: M.D. degree from the University of Kansas School of Medicine, general surgery residency training at Parkland Memorial



Hospital in Dallas, surgical fellowship at the University of Texas Southwestern School of Medicine, and plastic surgery residency, also at the University of Kansas.

In 1969, Dr. Salyer returned to Texas to found the first plastic surgery training program in the Metroplex area. Here, he served as chairman of the Division of Plastic Surgery at Southwestern. In 1970, at Children's Medical Center in Dallas, he developed one of the first multidisciplinary craniofacial teams in the U.S. That year, Dr. Salyer and his team of specialists

"When I go into the operating room, I become a very determined, triple type A, super-programmed, super perfectionist," says Dr. Kenneth Salyer. Surgeons worldwide have adopted many of Dr. Salyer's innovative techniques.

PHOTOGRAPH BY GARY CLARK

I've learned my courage in life from the courage that these children and families exhibit.

Dr. Kenneth Salyer

Dr. Salyer often corrects extensive disease and deformities. The red in this translucent skull represents a tumor. About 20% of the 500 operations he performs yearly are free.

performed the first intracranial surgery in the Southwest. Since then, he and his team have taught surgeons and treated children in every state and in 60 countries. He's performed about 15,000 surgeries during his career, many of them donated.

Dr. Salyer was one of the first surgeons in the world to use craniofacial techniques in infants, bucking conventional wisdom that advocated waiting until the child stopped growing. "The idea is to have them looking as good as they can when they go to school," the compassionate surgeon explains. "Then, as they grow, if they're programmed to grow abnormally, to change them to make them look as good as they can as they grow through that stage. It's the surgery of self-esteem."

Thanks to that, Aliza Milliken, now 2, may never face peer rejection because of her appearance. "She was born without eyebrow bone," says her mother, Alecia, of McKinney. Passing her hand over her daughter's now angelic face and pointing to the top of Aliza's head, the mother says, "The right section of skull is donor bone. Dr. Salyer is a miracle man."

The son of a dentist, Dr. Salyer remembers being "a frail, sickly kid with asthma," spending hours tediously building train models. Now, when the grandfather of six sits on the floor of his dinosaur and cowboy exam rooms playing with his patients, his caring manner eases fears.

The grandfatherly image vanishes when he enters the operating room.

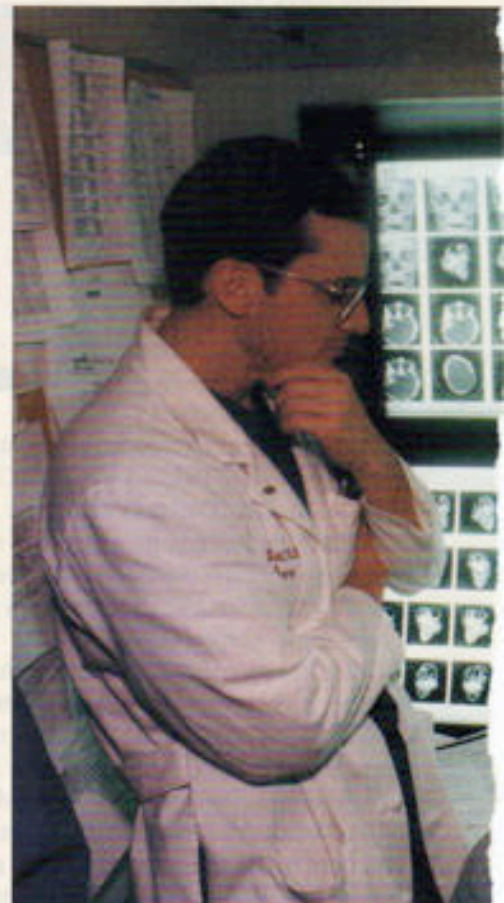


FACE VALUE

If you'd like to help, contact the World Craniofacial Foundation, P.O. Box 515838, Dallas, TX 75251-5838; 1-800-533-3315. E-mail address is worldcf@worldnet.att.net. The Web site is www.worldcf.org.

"You make a zigzag incision in the head, peel the whole face down, go inside the head, take the skull out, and work on the inside and outside of the face at the same time," he matter-of-factly describes the basics of craniofacial surgery. But he never forgets the child at the heart of his efforts. "I know every one of these kids," Dr. Salyer says. "Even if I do a thousand cases, I can remember."

Both he and his wife, Luci Lara-Salyer, recall the day Deborah, a little girl from Ecuador, showed up unexpectedly with her parents at Dr. Salyer's office. "It was one of those life-or-death cases that he doesn't get too often," says Luci, who often accompanies her husband on missions



SALYER EVEN TRANSFORMS SALYER—INTO SANTA

Each year, Dr. Kenneth Salyer transforms himself into Santa. For more than 20 years, the annual Christmas party at Medical City Dallas Hospital has drawn Dr. Salyer's patients, ranging from weeks-old babies about to have surgery to grateful teens now leading normal lives.

"I've got to have rosy cheeks," he tells his wife and makeup artist for the day, Luci Lara-Salyer. "Do I have enough of a belly?" he asks grandson Ken III. "Ho, ho, ho," the Santa surgeon laughs.

A three-dimensional model of his "dream center dedicated to craniofacial surgery" rests amid the Santa gear cluttering his office. It'll take \$50 million to get the center up and running. With managed care at the forefront, the dream looks improbable. But never say never to a man like Dr. Salyer. Since craniofacial problems are little known, Dr. Salyer recently wrote a book for the general public tentatively titled *The Butterfly Legacy*. He's looking for a publisher.

But now it's time for Santa's debut, and the room full of children and parents is abuzz. "We came to this party [before surgery] when Parker was 6 weeks old," says mother Michelle Niemeyer of Fort Worth. Now a handsome 2-year-old, Parker's cleft lip and palate were diagnosed when Michelle was only 22 weeks pregnant. Overcome by the memory, the young mother begins crying. "Just seeing all the kids and the wonderful work Dr. Salyer has done makes me very emotional."

Then Santa appears. Hundreds of sweet, innocent voices cheer, their faces filled with hope and wonder as they flock to the miracle man, looking for magic.



to other countries. The child had a grotesque and dangerous overgrowth of facial tissue which resulted in the loss of one eye. Subsequent surgery by Dr. Salyer was delicate. "Because of the bleeding, either she was going to make it or she wasn't," Luci continues. "But it went great, thank God."

While taking the child to an eye specialist, Luci witnessed firsthand the subtle bravery these children exhibit daily. "They were going to put in a prosthesis [for her missing eye]," Luci says. In the waiting room, the two encountered another child. "This other little girl looked hard at Deborah and stared right at her, tugging at her mother," Luci recalls. "She didn't say anything to Deborah, but her expression . . ." Deborah's response to the other child? "She just waved at her and smiled," Luci recalls.

For children like Deborah, fortitude in the face of rejection is as necessary as breathing. Merely to show their faces—literally—requires an act of supreme courage. Witness that muted valor daily, Dr. Salyer says, and you'll strive to find some heroic qualities of your own.

"I've learned the courage of standing up for them, no matter what," says Dr. Salyer. "It's our responsibility to see that every child of the world with a major deformity is taken care of." Toward that end, he's founded the World Craniofacial Foundation, worked with international groups, fought legislative battles over insurance, and volunteered his talent time and again to needy kids.

"I know that there are only a few surgeons who can deliver what I can deliver, so I want to share it with [the children]," says Dr. Salyer, who attributes his gifts to God. "We're all here on earth for a reason. I'm here to serve and do what I'm doing. That's why I do it." *Nancy Dorman-Hickson*

Dr. Salyer (right) and Dr. Eric Hubli (standing, left) view radiology charts with a neuroradiologist before surgery. A craniofacial team could include nearly a dozen specialists.