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HELPING HAND

Two decades after retiring, Dr. Michael Dennis continues to impact the medical community

As a Santa Barbara plastic surgeon, Dr. Michael T.B. Dennis spiffed up many celebrities, including chef Julia Child. “She said, ‘Can you make me look rested but not different?’” Dennis recalls. “She was so pleased she offered to prepare dinner for me, my wife, and our friends—in our kitchen.”

Star-studded encounters aside, Dennis is most proud of his pro bono work fixing cleft and other congenital deformities across six continents with Doctors Without Borders and other charitable organizations.

In Samoa, Dennis repaired a sawmill worker’s hand after he’d lost his thumb and parts of three fingers. “All I had to work with was his pinky finger—so I transferred that, something I’d never done before.” When Dennis checked back a year later, “not only had he returned to his occupation, but said, ‘Look, doc,’ and crushed a soda can with that hand.”

After decades as a surgeon, Dennis required healing of his own. Ruptured neck disks limited functioning in his left hand, rendering him unable to operate. He sought a solution himself and launched Hand-XTenders, a maker of devices to aid the manually disabled.

In 1998, Dennis and his wife chose to “retire” to Palm Beach, where they had a home. Confessing he’s “not someone who sits around,” he turned his attention to medical community volunteer activism.

Now, he’s focused on improving health care, to include the creation of a regional medical guide for Palm Beach County and helping to establish the Schmidt College of Medicine at Florida Atlantic University, where he remains chair of the advisory board. He also serves as president of the Palm Beach County Medical Society’s Service Board, which delivers \$1.2 million of free health care to the underinsured and uninsured every year.

“I grew up believing you should use your talents for the betterment of others,” Dennis says. “I’m still looking for ways to help my fellow man.”

That mission began during his senior year at Harvard. After dabbling in Japanese art, economics, and social studies, he decided to become a doctor. Following med school at the University of Florida, “I couldn’t make up my mind on a specialty,” the Kentucky native says.

A computer then matched him with Stanford Medical School’s surgical residencies. There, he embraced each specialty, but plastic and reconstructive surgery became his calling. Also at Stanford, he spearheaded the development of a physician assistant program.

“I’ve enjoyed everything I’ve done in my life,” Dennis says. “I’ve always wanted to give back my good fortune.” —Michele Meyer



JEFFREY THOLL PHOTOGRAPHY

Dr. Michael T.B. Dennis

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CLOSE TO HOME

Dr. Dror Paley traveled abroad to bring a life-changing surgical technique to the United States

In 1985, Dror Paley, then an orthopedic surgery resident at the University of Toronto, heard that those born with uneven or contorted limbs could be spared amputation. He immediately yearned to find out more.

"Back then, operations to save limbs were very problematic, with poor results," says the Israeli-born Paley, whose family moved to Ottawa when he was 4. "But an Italian at our hospital knew of a Russian who'd created a new, successful method unknown in North America."

After meeting the Italian surgeon, Paley mastered Russian before heading to the Soviet Union to learn how to use external braces to promote new bone growth in order to elongate and re-shape arms and legs. He studied under limb-lengthening leader Gavriil Abramovich Ilizarov, known as the magician of Kurgan.

Though Paley is Jewish and was trailed by the KGB during his tutorship behind the Iron Curtain, he was not deterred. He returned twice, the last time accompanied by 50 doctors eager to acquire the same skills.

In 1987, Paley relocated to the United States and began working as the chief of pediatric orthopedics at the University of Maryland Medical Center, where he became the first surgeon in the country to implement Ilizarov's techniques.

"Since then, kids who would've lost their limbs to amputation will get operations that didn't exist before—and they'll end up running and jumping just like other kids," Paley says. "That's a major paradigm shift."

Over three decades in his field, Paley has racked up impressive numbers, to include eight patents and repairs of a million limbs across 90 countries, six continents, and all 50 states. His curriculum vitae spans 127 pages, none of it filler. And his influence will carry on for generations through the more than 800 surgeons he's trained.

Paley moved his practice from Maryland to West Palm Beach in 2009, and now serves as medical director of the Paley Orthopedic and Spine Institute at St. Mary's Medical Center. There, Paley and his team reconstruct limbs of children and adults with complex deformities due to birth defects, trauma, and infection. They also perform joint replacements and other orthopedic surgeries.

"Living in a city without a significant winter makes it much easier for patients who are on crutches and in wheelchairs," Paley says. "It's a terrific place to rehabilitate, [which is] a big part of what we do. If I had come here earlier, I never would've left. Just look outside. West Palm Beach is a slice of heaven." —M.M.



Dr. Dror Paley

SALLY PRISSET

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SKIN DEEP

*A Delray Beach dermatologist combines science
and service to heal patients worldwide*

Childhood heroes? Dr. John Strasswimmer's were super, all right: philosopher Henry David Thoreau, activist Mahatma Gandhi, and humanitarian and physician Albert Schweitzer.

These idols, combined with an experience volunteering at a soup kitchen in college, sealed his fate.

"Science plus service equals medicine," says Strasswimmer, a partner at Dermatology Associates of the Palm Beaches in Delray Beach. "My path to medical school was direct."

After earning his M.D. and Ph.D. in cancer molecular biology at Tufts University School of Medicine, he interned at Harvard Medical School and completed his dermatology residency at Yale School of Medicine. He then embarked on a laser fellowship focused on skin cancer at Massachusetts General Hospital, and another in Mohs surgery at Boston's American College of Mohs Surgery.

The cutting-edge Mohs approach enables skin cancer surgeons to confirm they've removed an entire malignancy. Even better, the technique can be done as an out-patient procedure with local anesthesia. "It's safer, less expensive, and liberates doctors to treat patients anywhere," explains Strasswimmer.

His aspiration to provide care regardless of location or means can be traced back to Thoreau, Gandhi, and Schweitzer.

"Thoreau taught me if you're not happy with your life, change it," Strasswimmer says. "Gandhi was a man of peace and showed it can be stronger than conflict. Nobel Prize winner Schweitzer was the first missionary doctor to go to Africa. He believed our duty on Earth is to serve others."

Strasswimmer, who founded Dermatology Medical Missions in 2011, regularly ventures into remote areas of Africa, mainly to treat people with albinism. "They have [the] triple problem of skin cancers, poor eyesight, and a terrible social stigma in the African culture."

Whether he's home or abroad, "delivering dignity is the most satisfying thing I've ever done," he says. "In the same afternoon, I can treat a homeless person and a major corporate executive. We all look the same wearing a paper gown in an exam room."

Besides performing more than 10,000 facial skin cancer operations with cosmetic reconstruction, Strasswimmer has a cancer drug patent and is researching the molecular causes of skin cancer. He also teaches biochemistry and dermatology at Florida Atlantic University and serves as medical director of the Melanoma and Cutaneous Oncology Tumor Board at Lynn Cancer Institute at Boca Raton Regional Hospital.

"The disease is largely preventable and largely curable when diagnosed early," says Strasswimmer, who hopes to create a global skin cancer awareness program. "I want no one to ever die of skin cancer." —M.M.



Dr. John Strasswimmer

CARDIOLOGY (cont.)

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WONDER WOMAN

A Greenacres gynecologist wants to help women discover and celebrate their bodies at any age

Gynecology has a reputation for rattling patients and doctors alike, especially as it pertains to sexuality.

At first, even Dr. Maureen Whelihan wasn't interested in the profession. "I'd wanted to become an obstetrician from 11 years old," says the owner of Elite GYN Care of the Palm Beaches. "For a fifth-grade assignment, I wrote that I wanted to deliver babies."

Her father, a former Navy medic, greatly influenced her early ambitions. Every evening after dinner, he'd pull out medical tomes to quiz his four children on the body's metamorphosis from cells to fetus. "From fourth grade, I pulled the books down myself," recalls Whelihan.

Yet when the time came to choose a career, she felt she wasn't ready to focus on becoming a doctor. She chose nursing instead, a prosperous deviation for her and her future patients.

While working as a labor and delivery nurse for more than a decade at St. Mary's Medical Center in West Palm Beach, Whelihan felt drawn to gynecology. She went on to earn her M.D. at the University of South Florida in Tampa.

"My skills as a nurse and doctor give me a great advantage," she says. "Nursing involves empathy and attention to patients' needs. Physicians troubleshoot, manage, and heal. I still do my best to explain even complex information so it's understandable but not oversimplified."

Each year, Elite GYN Care adds services to help women age with beauty and grace. But Whelihan's reach extends beyond her Greenacres office. In 2013, she coauthored a book entitled *Kiss and Tell: Secrets of Sexual Desire from Women 15 to 97* with the goal of normalizing the conversation surrounding sexuality.

Locally, her philanthropic endeavors and achievements revolve around women and medicine. She's received the Executive Women of the Palm Beaches' Women in Leadership Award, has been named Woman of the Year by the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society, and serves on the board of the Palm Beach County Medical Society, where she is chair of the women's issues committee and the Project Access Board, a coordinated system of volunteer care and diagnostic services for uninsured county residents.

Whelihan shares her quest for excellence with her five-person staff. Each year they choose a subject to learn together, such as sign language. Above all, she constantly aspires to challenge herself. At age 50, she bought a Harley Low Rider motorcycle. But after tangling with the 700-pounder, her goal for her sixtieth birthday (in three years) will be "something crazy, [but] not life-threatening." —M.M.



Dr. Maureen Whelihan