

CLIENT PROFILE

Dr. Larry Nichter Interview: September, 2005

I am so pleased that our client, Dr. Larry Nichter, agreed to join us for a newsletter interview. Dr. Nichter's dedication to a worldwide humanitarian effort for the past two decades makes a very compelling story.

Larry graduated from the Boston University School of Medicine, and then completed his residency at the UCLA Medical Center. Next he held several advanced Plastic Surgery Fellowships at the University of Virginia Medical Center, and also received a Masters degree in surgery from the University of Virginia. He was Chief of Plastic Surgical Research at USC for nine years, and during that time he trained some 30 plastic surgeons. Rather than accept the Plastic Surgical Chairmanship at Yale, which he was offered, he decided to move from Los Angeles to Orange County to start a private practice and to raise his young family.



Larry feels his greatest happiness has been his life with his wife, Carol, and their three sons: Austin 21, and identical twins Travis and Bryce 19. Two are studying at UC Santa Cruz, and the other at Suffolk University in Boston. Larry suffered a personal tragedy when Carol, his wife of twenty years and a physician with her own practice, died suddenly two years ago. “It was because of her that I had the financial freedom to take time away from my own practice, especially in the earlier years, to volunteer and hopefully make a difference.” Larry reminisces, “She was the love of my life.”

Although nationally recognized for his Cosmetic and Reconstructive Surgical talents, Larry is one of those rare people who, despite his considerable professional achievements, found a way to give back even more than he receives. Over the past two decades, Larry has traveled to many parts of the world to perform reconstructive surgeries on indigent children and to train local physicians in advanced surgical techniques. This experience led Larry and a group of medical professional associates to form the Plasticos Foundation six years ago, as a nonprofit, nonpolitical, nonreligious volunteer organization dedicated to correcting birth defects, congenital malformations, and traumatic disfigurements for those unable to afford the necessary treatments.

With typical modesty, Larry says that while he appreciates the thanks he receives from doctors and patients on these trips, not to mention the plaudits from the medical community and media, he really feels he “gets the better of the deal, thanks to the personal rewards from this work.” He notes that the children in these countries who are afflicted with deformities are typically shunned or feared by cultures that may interpret the maladies as God’s punishment or the result of malevolent spirits. “I also think my patients and family benefit from my trips. Imagine! Where else in your life can you spend perhaps 90 minutes and change a person’s entire life? A child that might otherwise be ostracized and live his or her life in a closet, never leaving home, is now able to be a normal, productive person. These people sometimes wait in the rain for three days just to see us. They are so thankful; I receive dozens of letters in broken English or other languages. Years later, I continue to hear from the surgeons I trained who still can’t believe their good fortune. Many say that they learned more during those two-week visits than they did during any 2 or 3 years of their surgical training. Before we came, they basically practiced without continuing education and were very frustrated.”

Larry has been on four trips in the past year: Brazil, India, Guatemala and Cuba. Larry’s 40th and most recent trip was to Cuba. Just getting permission from the State Department for the trip took two years. Larry did a site visit last year—evaluating the surgical facilities, seeing what equipment would be needed, and making sure the trip could be made safely—before bringing in a volunteer medical crew. The group consisted of 16 members: plastic surgeons, anesthesiologists, pediatricians, recovery room nurses, coordinators, and translators.

The Foundation’s biggest ongoing obstacle is funding. “I try to limit myself to one or two trips a year but situations arise where our help is so desperately needed, that I can’t say no. In Guatemala, for example, there is no training program for plastic surgeons. Ecuador has a program, but graduates an average of only one new resident per year. Graduates are typically doctors who, once trained, must go off on their own without the assistance of any advanced fellowships.”

Larry adds, “There is also a significant brain drain among these doctors. Many leave the area; those who stay or return to their homeland tend to do lucrative cosmetic surgery, which leaves the indigent population unaided. We try to develop programs that encourage physicians to stay on and to do badly needed reconstructive surgeries as well. We met and worked with a plastic surgeon in Guatemala, and now hope to start that country’s first training program for plastic and reconstructive surgeons. You must understand that these are truly poor countries and have virtually no funding to support these types of training.”

Larry says, “We have zero overhead. We have had a few fundraisers to date, and do need help raising funds for these trips. We pay for our brochures out of our own pockets. Even our warehouse space is donated. I know of no other non-profit groups that can say the same thing. Of the donations we receive, 100% goes to helping care for the unfortunate children, and to training local doctors to continue that care. This allows us to be nimble and to respond to critical needs. Many organizations provide wonderful care for children with terrible deformities, but they don’t emphasize medical training and self-sufficiency as much. Often, they go back to the same place repeatedly where cases are saved for them because locals know they will return. It becomes almost a co-dependency. We do the opposite. We continually change venues, and, if we do come back, we change the level of teaching, starting with simpler techniques such as taking care of wounds, later moving on to treating cleft palates, microsurgery, maximal facial surgery, and so on. Then we leave and go someplace else. It’s a different emphasis—that of teaching someone to fish instead of just feeding them.”

In some countries, there are no medical libraries for local physicians to use. Therefore, Larry and his partners have donated two tons of medical texts and outfitted four medical centers in Africa. The local doctors who work there are typically very bright people with excellent psychomotor skills who are aware of surgical techniques, but who have hesitated to try them for the first time on their own. The donated texts help to encourage the local physicians to do more and better procedures for their patients.

Plasticos Foundation starts each year with close to a zero budget, so it is always looking for donations or the skills of people who can help with fundraising, logistics, warehousing, etc. Larry laughs again; “I say fundraising but we have no formal fundraising; we are dependent on voluntary donations. We are blessed with some tremendously magnanimous people who contribute, among them my private patients and people who have read about us. The OC Register did a series of articles about us recently that was very complimentary and helpful. One of their reporters joined us on a trip to the Amazon and wrote about our exploits from the field.”

Larry has been recognized by Orange County Magazine as one of the “Best Plastic Surgeons in Orange County” each year since the inception of that survey in 1996. He is one of a handful of doctors named annually to two separate “Top Doctors” and “Best Doctors” national medical peer review surveys such as “The doctor you would choose if you or a family member needed plastic or reconstructive surgery.” While gratified, Larry hopes that acknowledgement will bring more attention to the Foundation, and also help point out the importance of a board certification in plastic surgery; he remarks that much of the cosmetic surgery being done in Orange County today is performed by plastic surgeons who are not properly trained or board certified by the American Board of Plastic Surgery.

Larry hopes to create an endowment in the name of his deceased wife, Carol Bryant. “She was such an important part of my life’s work; I want to do something to memorialize her support.” Larry believes if he can get the endowment in Carol’s name up to one million dollars, the earned interest would support an annual trip in perpetuity. “That would take a lot of the financial burden off of us and allow us to go after new sites and specialty projects.”

We wish you all the best in your great charitable work, Larry. It is a privilege having you as a client and a friend.

Readers interested in learning more can visit www.plasticosfoundation.org. If you would like to volunteer services or donate funds, Larry can be reached through his website, www.drnichter.com or at Lnichter@earthlink.net. Dr. Nichter’s offices are at 7677 Center Avenue, Suite 401, Huntington Beach, CA 92647 and 1401 Avocado Avenue, Newport Beach, CA 92660. The phone number is 714/902-1100

\$100 will buy medicine for a child
\$250 will buy medical supplies for a child
\$700 will fund a surgery for one child
\$3000 enables one physician or nurse to operate overseas to 2 weeks
\$5000 will buy surgical instruments for a typical trip
\$30,000 funds an entire surgical mission including medical professionals
An endowment of \$750,000 will fund one yearly trip indefinitely