

Bakersfield surgeon travels the globe saving faces

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Dr. Hootan Daneshmand works at his office on Thursday. Dr. Daneshmand practices cosmetic surgery in Bakersfield and travels overseas once a year to perform surgeries on disadvantaged children in developing nations.



Courtesy photo BEFORE: A patient of Hootan Daneshmand suffers from a cleft lip prior to the quick surgery. Daneshmand operates on as many as 10 children each day on his visits abroad.

Somewhere in Venezuela, there's a boy who smiles with confidence.

He no longer feels like an outcast at school, no longer sits by himself. The other children let him sip from their cups and join in their games. He's happier and more talkative, even popular among his peers.

All this because the cysts on his bottom lip are gone, removed during a 10-minute surgery by a doctor whose name he probably never knew. All this because of Hootan Daneshmand.

"It was like turning a light on," said Daneshmand, a plastic surgeon who practices in downtown Bakersfield. "It's just incredible how his life was changed in less than an hour."

Daneshmand, 46, sat in his office Thursday afternoon wearing a black V-neck scrub top and rounded square-framed glasses --

pretty standard for a doctor aside from the blue tie-dye pattern on his bandanna.

It sufficed as a small sign that he's far from standard. Daneshmand, quite literally, has reshaped the lives of hundreds of children around the world.

Working with Rotaplast International, the Iranian-born doctor has traveled the globe to perform surgical philanthropy. He repairs cleft lips and palates as well as other congenital defects, usually on children whose families are not able to afford medical care.

"It's really the highest calling of a plastic surgeon's profession," said Rotaplast co-founder Peter Lagarias, who met Daneshmand shortly after the nonprofit was established in 1992. "To be able to turn these kids' lives around, it's an art form.

"There's no reward as rich as helping someone and seeing the immediacy of the change."

Daneshmand is leaving Sunday from San Francisco for an 18-day trip to Sohag University Hospital in Sohag, Egypt, more than 250 miles south of Cairo.

He's never been to Egypt before, but that fact doesn't really bother him. He said he doesn't worry much at all about language barriers or cultural chasms.

"It's amazing that people are very similar no matter where you go," he said. "Your average person, they're all so alike."

Daneshmand, who came to the United States when he was 14, graduated from UC Irvine before attending the University of Southern California for medical school.



Courtesy photo AFTER: Cleft lip surgery, performed by Hootan Daneshmand on a Rotaplast International outreach mission, gives the child a newfound ability to eat, speak and express emotion.



Courtesy photo Hootan Daneshmand has seen hundreds of patients, including this young boy, on his trips overseas to correct congenital defects.

Still, he said, the volunteer work he does overseas is the most meaningful to him. And so, somewhere in Egypt, there will be a doctor smiling with satisfaction.

He moved to Bakersfield in 1990, completed his general surgery training at Kern Medical Center and spent time with Fernando Prunes, a doctor whom Daneshmand called "a great inspiration" for his career in plastic surgery.

He then served as a resident at Saint Francis Memorial Hospital in San Francisco under the direction of Rotaplast co-founder Angelo Capozzi.

These days, Daneshmand goes back and forth between offices in Southern California and a facility on 16th Street in downtown Bakersfield.

He first went overseas as an outreach surgeon in 1993 and realized the enormous impact he could have on the livelihood of others. He hasn't stopped since.

"I thought, 'This is pretty cool -- I can do this,'" Daneshmand said. "A lot of these people have this stigma that they're retarded. They're not."

His brand of philanthropy takes him abroad about once a year to countries like Chile and Argentina, Mexico and the Philippines.

He hauls boxes of medical supplies and equipment through customs, then loads them onto buses. He's set up shop in large hospitals as well as tiny clinics that are long bus rides away from city centers, dust swirling and settling everywhere.

After evaluating patients and interacting with parents at an opening clinic, he does as many as 10 surgeries each day. The work is taxing, but it's all worth it to Daneshmand.

"It's a mob scene," he said. "But we try to do as many as we can in the short time we are there."

In 1997, Daneshmand fixed the cleft lip of a 70-year-old woman in Guatemala. He's performed surgery on children whose parents had married because they both had facial abnormalities.

The surgeries are so transformative because they are not just aesthetically motivated; they also help to alleviate hardships with eating, speaking and expressing emotion. Daneshmand has exhibited an unwavering desire to achieve those goals.

"Hootan has been very dedicated to doing this work," Lagarias said. "He's a fun-loving guy who is very serious and very skilled."

In his private practice, Daneshmand specializes in cosmetic plastic surgery and breast augmentation. At his Bakersfield office, he sees many breast cancer patients.