

best deal I ever made |

## Lewis J. Obi, M.D.: Semper Fi



**Distiguated plastic surgeon and art collector credits the Marine Corps for teaching him skills necessary for combat and compassion.**

—by Dr. Lewis Obi;  
photo by Bradley Stookey

**T**he best deal I ever made was pledging my service to America and enlisting in the United States Marine Corps. Not only did I have the honor of defending the greatest country in the world, but my training as a Marine gave me the wisdom, courage, discipline and sensitivity to chart a thrilling and challenging destiny. Being a Marine led me to the rewarding path of becoming a plastic and reconstructive surgeon and the founder of Obiarts, an international art corporation.

I was born and raised in Jacksonville, the fifth of eight children. I grew up in Lackawanna on the Westside. My family lived in a modest three-room house, which was part of a grocery store. I

never thought of myself as restricted and poor; instead, I relished the freedom of sleeping on a porch swing or camping out in the front yard with my brothers. Life was an adventure. And everywhere I looked, I saw opportunity.

My positive outlook stemmed from the inspiring stories my father shared with me. Habib Obi was raised in a small Christian community in what is today known as Iraq. In his childhood, the region was known as Mesopotamia and under control of the Ottomans. With great foresight, my father's family found a way to get him out of Mesopotamia, through Argentina, and finally to the United States. The first thing my father did upon arriving in America, as

an homage to his freedom, was join the United States Army.

Through my father, I was raised with the spirit of adventure and a heart of gratitude. I loved the opportunity to explore and work. Needing little sleep—perhaps it was the the porch swing after all—I would awake in the early morning hours and start my day working at a bakery. After school (although I skipped the majority of classes daily due to sheer boredom), I expanded my enterprises to selling papers (*The Jacksonville Journal*) and peddling peanuts at the ballpark. I was proud of the money I earned and excited to hand it over to my mother. My mother would hug me tightly and whisper in broken English that I was not to tell my father. I had no inkling that I was eventually making more money than my father. But I would respect the sparkle in my mom's eyes as she gave me half the money back for my own savings, and kept the other half for the family. It was our secret.

My mother, Raina Obi, was delightful—fun-loving, kind and easily persuaded by my ways. When I decided to join the Marines and drop out of high school, I was underage by two years. But I didn't let that get in my way. I had my mother sign the papers, knowing she couldn't read English. I simply told her I was joining a club called the Sea Scouts.

When I arrived at the Marine Corps boot camp, I deeply regretted (for myself) that I had misinformed my mother. My request to call her and clear up the matter was denied with great laughter. I realized there was no turning back. In hindsight, this was the best thing that could have happened to me. My maverick, independent ways were put into focus during my three months at boot camp. A sobering reality. Yet the

same drill instructors who beat me down into nothing, ended up building me into a person I had no idea existed inside. These drill instructors saw my potential and forced me to do the same.

As a Marine (and later as a Naval Medical Officer), I had many assignments including setting up M.A.S.H. units and makeshift hospitals. I saw first-hand the miracle of doctors saving lives and their heartaches over losing lives. In the military, I witnessed complicated reconstructive surgery on burn victims, amputees and others suffering from massive deformities. I knew in an instant that my calling was to be a surgeon. But there was an obvious obstacle. I never finished any meaningful high school curriculum.

I expressed my desire to attend medical school and was given an aptitude test through the Marine Corps. Much to my surprise, I scored higher than I ever believed possible. I was then guided to finish my high school requirements and quickly began attending college classes under the GI Bill.

I was accepted into medical school, but could not celebrate my achievement because I had no way to afford the cost of attending. I never gave up. Instead, I found an alternate route. My training as a Marine had taught me focus, perseverance and patience. I opted to become a pharmacist, graduating the five-year program at the University of Florida in three years. I returned to Jacksonville and worked as a pharmacist at Owens in Riverside, saving every penny towards my real passion of becoming a surgeon.

A couple of years later, I began medical school at the University of Miami. Being a pharmacist had served me well. Not only did I continue my pharmacy work to financially support myself through medical school, but the knowledge I gained as a pharmacist was invaluable to my studies as a doctor.

My four years as a medical student were exhilarating. I interned in the United States Navy rotating through the

specialties of general surgery, orthopedic surgery, internal medicine, OB/GYN and plastic surgery—knowing I always wanted to study the art and science of plastic surgery. During my residency, I studied cardiovascular surgery, plastic surgery, hand surgery and maxillo-facial surgery. The leaders of the field—doctors J. William Littler, Ralph Mallard, Charlie Ammons and Tom Baker—also became my mentors and supporters.

After graduation, I moved back to Jacksonville to begin my practice in plastic and reconstructive surgery. In my mind, I never forgot the training I received as a Marine and later as a Naval Medical Officer. This experience inspired me to undertake the pioneering idea of building a free-standing center for plastic surgery in 1976. By 1987, after an arduous road of challenges, I opened the first comprehensive, licensed ambulatory surgical center for plastic surgery in the state of Florida. I am an ardent proponent of patient safety and continue to work with plastic surgeons throughout the state of Florida in encouraging them to build their own ambulatory surgical centers.

My love for the art and science of plastic surgery also attracted me to the visual art of painting and sculpture. I began studying art history in my spare time and before long became an avid collector of art. I was, and continue to be, an eclectic collector—relishing 19th century British watercolors, 20th century symbolists and surrealists and the glass/crystal of Tiffany, Steubens and Baccarat. My fascination with Greek mythology serendipitously brought me in contact with an extraordinary British artist, Daniel Samuels, who also became a close friend and mentor. It was because of Daniel that I was inspired to establish Obiarts Inc., an international art company that developed an exclusive series of lithographs by Daniel entitled, *Olympians, Gods and Heroes*. The launching celebration for this project was held

in New York and supported by Lord Charles Churchill, Donald Trump and Estee Lauder.

My most unexpected endeavor with Obiarts was into the field of American Modernism. Through an attorney friend of mine, I was introduced to the work of Manierre Dawson. At the time, Dawson was not widely known. A group of us bought a large collection of his paintings and sculptures. While my partners were interested in tax write-offs, my wife, playwright Myra Bairstow, and I felt a mission to further the scholarship of Manierre Dawson and establish his rightful place in art history. This, after all, was a pioneering artist who painted several of the world's first abstract canvases in 1910, sold his first painting to Gertrude Stein and was shown in the world-renowned Armory Show of 1913. Although Dawson was enigmatic to the art world, Myra and I persevered through research to advance the cause of Dawson. We bought our partners out over the years and worked with leading art scholars, curators and galleries to establish Dawson's role in the Modernism Movement. Today, Dawson is represented in 35 major museums throughout the United States. In 2007, Myra and I had the honor of seeing Dawson's key 1912 cubist painting, entitled *The Three Graces*, installed in the Modern Room of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Every worthwhile deal will always require risk, patience, perseverance and the challenge of obstacles. My agreement to serve in the military unexpectedly led me to the rewarding field of plastic surgery and into the fascinating world of art. It was a circuitous route, but one of excitement, knowledge and indelible memories. The lesson of a good deal is that it multiplies and overflows into unexpected facets of one's life. Semper Fi. #

*Obi is a Diplomat American Board of Plastic Surgery, Fellow Royal Society of Art London and President of ObiArts.*

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