

By Amy Di Leo

With a career that spans decades and includes military duty during two wars, Lewis J. Obi, MD, gives new meaning to the expression, “Never give up.” With all he has achieved both in his career and through his myriad hobbies—which includes art collecting, marathon running, and martial arts—some might stop or at least slow down, but not this Jacksonville, Fla., physician. As a teacher, trainer, lecturer and researcher of new technologies, this veteran board-certified plastic surgeon, who started out a high school dropout, is just beginning.

A young Lewis Obi was bored in school, didn’t attend much, and instead found a way to bring home money to help support his family—his mom, dad, five brothers, and two sisters. He was a savvy, young businessman who instead of attending school sold newspapers, sold peanuts at a local ballpark, and worked at a bakery to make money. He shared his



PHOTOS BY SCOTT SMITH

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Aesthetic Warrior

Lewis J. Obi, MD, stays very active on plastic surgery’s front lines

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earnings with his mom without his dad knowing.

He quit school and coaxed his mother, an Iraqi immigrant who couldn't read, to sign his enlistment papers. At 16, he found himself in Marine Corps boot camp. Obi joined the Reserves without being required to show a birth certificate. He later became one of the youngest sergeants, at 18 years old.

As soon as he was old enough to be shipped out to the war front, Obi found himself in Korea at the end of the Korean War, where he served as an aviation mechanic. He worked on the F9F Panther fighter jets, the same plane flown by famous baseball Hall of Fame pitcher Ted Williams and astronaut John Glenn, who were both Marine pilots.

With skills that included photography and speed typing, before long Obi was running a photo lab on the side and helping senior officers by typing their correspondences. He also spent time hanging around a MASH (mobile army surgical hospital) unit, observing the military doctors operate on the wounded and tend to the types of horrific trauma only seen during wartime. Obi was intrigued by the reconstructive techniques of the military doctors who worked on the injured soldiers.

DEALING WITH TRAUMA

Obi's first contact with plastic surgery occurred at the Marine Corps hospital at Camp Lejeune, NC. Obi says he sustained a nasal fracture that required medical attention by a specialist. “I was always enamored and fascinated by doctors. As a child, though scared of doctors, I was always interested in the medical profession,” he recalls.

“In Korea, there were a lot of trauma patients, as well as native South Koreans in need of complicated surgical procedures,” he adds. “While in the Marine Corps—and later in the Navy—I witnessed complicated reconstructive surgery on burn victims, amputees, and others suffering from massive deformities. I knew in an instant my calling was to be a plastic surgeon.”

Historically, reconstructive surgical procedures developed during wartime. Obi got good firsthand experience of the specialty, and he was hooked.

When he returned from Korea, Obi

was 19 years old and wanted to go back to school. He had scored very high on aptitude tests while in the Marines and briefly considered becoming an officer, but his dream—or “pipe dream” as he called it—was to become a plastic surgeon. He received his high school diploma while in the service, but because of poor grades in high school and lack of appropriate classes he had trouble with college admissions. The GI Bill provided only for 36 months of financial support, so Obi integrated pharmacy school into his study of premed classes and attended the University of Florida.

THE LEARNING YEARS

Obi recalls that he was an excellent student. He completed the 5-year pharmacy undergraduate program and premed school requirements in only 3 years, by taking 25-hour semesters and summer classes. Because of his academic achievements, he was inducted into the Phi Kappa Phi honorary fraternity, as well as the Rho Chi National Pharmacy Honor Society. Obi was accepted to medical school, but because he didn't have the funds to attend he returned to Jacksonville to work as a pharmacist.

Though his career as a pharmacist was good financially, Obi never gave up on his dream to become a plastic surgeon. He worked long hours to earn the money he needed to enroll, 3 years later, in the University of Miami Medical School.

By then married and with a growing family, Obi continued as a pharmacist through medical school to make ends meet. He thrived academically, despite his claim that “in medical school I was always a maverick,” and remembers “the 3 years in pharmacy school were much more difficult than the 4 years I spent in medical school.” Obi was inducted into the AOA National Medical Honorary Society and was one of the founders of the medical school newspaper, *The UM Med Apprentice*.

Many top plastic surgeons practiced in Florida at the time, and Obi was fortunate to train with some of the well-known pioneers, including D. Ralph Millard, MD, and Thomas Baker, MD, FACS, both of whom were on staff at the University of Miami at the time. Obi refers to them as “two of the top 10 plastic surgeons of the 20th century.”

Baker was instrumental in the development of the Baker phenol peel, which is still used by physicians worldwide. In addition, he is a founder of the American Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons (ASAPS) and the founder of the internationally recognized Baker-Gordon Symposium on Cosmetic Surgery, the first-ever “cosmetic-only” conference. Obi was one of the faculty members at the Symposia in 1979.

Described by many as one of the most brilliant and creative plastic surgeons, Millard was named one of the 10 “Plastic Surgeons of the Millennium” by the American Society of Plastic Surgeons (ASPS) in 2000.

As a first-year medical student, Obi hung around Millard and discovered that they had similar military crossroads—Millard served in Korea as a naval officer when Obi was a teenaged Marine stationed at a nearby base. Ultimately, the two men became friends and Obi earned the elder's respect. Obi proudly proclaims 2 decades later, “Dr Millard presented me with a signed limited-edition copy of his two-volume book on cleft lip and palate surgery [*Cleft Craft: The Evolution of its Surgery*], which is still one of the most revered textbooks in all of medicine.”

TOUR OF DUTY

Obi reminisces, “After medical school, I wanted to go to Boston to do an internship at the [Brigham and Women's Hospital]. I did well on my boards and was at the top of my class. I placed well and was matched at the best Ivy League universities for an internship. But I was financially strapped, and the stipends were so low that I decided to enlist in the Navy. It was 1965 and the onset of the Vietnam War. The Navy gave me credit for the 8 years in the Marine Corps—my Reserves time plus medical school—so I had 11 years of longevity when I re-enlisted.”

So began Obi's rotating internship as a Naval Medical Officer during the Vietnam War. When asked about why he enlisted only during wartime, Obi chuckles and proudly says, “I'm a warrior,” but then adds, “I don't like war, but when you're young you don't know any better. I have five brothers who served in the military, and my dad did, too, so I am part of a patriotic segment that is an essential element of our great country. I especially pay

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homage to all Americans who have served our country before and after me.”

During Obi's internship, he rotated through internal medicine, OB/Gyn, orthopedics, cardiology, and more. He amassed an enormous amount of experience and knowledge during this training, but once he left the Navy he still had a general surgery and plastic surgery residency to complete before becoming board-eligible. He went back to Florida and enrolled in a University of Florida-affiliated residency at Jacksonville (JHEP).

“We rotated through all the hospitals in Jacksonville,” Obi says. “I also went to Boston to the Shriners’ Burn Center, and I spent some time in New York, Miami, Gainesville, and Mexico City doing mini-fellowships.”

HAND IT TO HIM

Some of Obi's mentors include John Snow, MD, of Jacksonville; Clifford Snyder, MD, of Salt Lake City; and renowned hand surgeon J. William Littler, MD, of New York.

“As part of my residency years in plastic surgery, I trained as a hand surgeon, maxillofacial surgeon, and pediatric cleft specialist. By the time I was board-eligible,” he says, “I was nearly 40.” Although today Obi rarely performs any of those procedures, he believes that his foundation in reconstructive work makes him a stronger surgeon.

One of Obi's proudest achievements was the creation and establishment of the first licensed comprehensive plastic surgery center in the state of Florida. “Early in my residency years, I saw the need to establish a freestanding surgical center,” he says.

The original 4,800-square-foot center now, 35 years later, fills out at 12,000 square feet and includes the Samuel Wells Surgicenter, a state-of-the-art operating facility that includes a four-bed recovery room with overnight accommodations, manned by more than a dozen staffers. The building is also home to Obi's Renaissance Center, a day spa, as well as his private practice containing “a world-class and eclectic art collection rarely seen in a clinical setting” Obi says.

Since this facility was the first of its kind in the state, there was no precedent when Obi applied for licensure. All of the procedure manuals, protocols, and patient safety standards had to be newly established. Obi worked with the State of Florida to create those documents.

Having the comprehensive licensed plastic surgery center has enabled Obi to continue to do what he loves and feels is most important: caring for his patients in “a safe, sensitive, and effective manner,” he



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notes. With an understanding that often plastic surgery procedures are not covered by insurance and that many patients truly need treatment, Obi consistently gives back to his community by performing pro bono surgeries.

“You can change an entire life often with a single operation,” he says. “The patients are so grateful. The psychological and spiritual reward and satisfaction is great. I also think it's a privilege that I am gifted with my skills and I am entrusted with such great patients.”

In addition, Obi has given those “rewards” all over the world. For example, he visited Ethiopia for a month, and on the trip he met an 18-year-old Ethiopian man with severe burns. “I could not treat his severe burn injuries there, and I was not sure what to do. Though Ethiopia was a Communist country then, I worked with the US State Department and arranged to bring him back to the States,” he says. The man, Solomon, and his brother returned with Obi and lived with his family for a time.

“After three operations, Solomon's hands and face were reconstructed with full function and minimal disfigurement,” he says. “But, Solomon didn't want to return home. After obtaining a permanent residence card, he worked at my clinic from 1987 until 2000. I treated him more like a son than an employee. Now, Solomon lives with his sister in Seattle.”

Obi has helped numerous breast cancer patients, as breast reconstruction is a procedure he finds gratifying. Late last year, John Murray, MD, joined Obi's practice after heading up the Susan Komen/University of Illinois Breast Cancer Center.

Perhaps Obi gets the most fulfillment helping active and retired military patients, especially World War II veterans. Mostly because of the many military bases in the Jacksonville area, Obi sees many veterans

MASTER OF MANY DISCIPLINES

Like many in his field, Lewis J. Obi, MD, has an interest in combining art and medicine. “After all,” he says, “medicine's contribution to art is the art of plastic surgery.”

Obi's interest in art began when he was a child, but it took off in the 1970s and 1980s when he created the international art firm, Obiarts, and began working with British artist Daniel Samuels. Obi was later inducted as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Art (FRSA). Currently, Obiarts owns the international copyright of all Samuels' paintings and is a major donor to museums, universities, and other institutions. For example, Samuels' “Olympians, Gods and Heroes” will be offered as an official art donation to England for the 2012 Olympics.

Obi is also an athlete in his own right—he runs a 6.5-minute mile and has completed three New York City marathons, doing the first when he was 63 years old, training only on a treadmill cranked up to 9.2 miles an hour.

He has earned three black belts in two different styles of martial arts. Always active, Obi is either at the gym or at the dojo 5 days a week. Evenings and weekends his exercise comes in the form of play with his young son, Alexander.

Clearly, Obi takes pride in his myriad accomplishments and those of his loved ones. He and his wife, playwright Myra Bairstow (who is the author of the off-Broadway play, “The Rise of Dorothy Hale,” as well as the catalogue raisonné for American artist Manierre Dawson), maintain a second residence in Manhattan. His pride for her accomplishments is apparent. Alexander, a preschooler, is way ahead of his time, studying Greek mythology and, like mom and dad, loves art. Obi's six older children are successful as professors and researchers—one is a police officer.

Looking back and still actively on the forefront of plastic surgery, Obi humbly recognizes that he has been very fortunate, indeed.

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and says they are some of his favorite patients.

"TR Roebuck was in Patton's army. He's about 90 years old and has amazing stories to tell. I try to spend as much time as I can with him, because I just enjoy listening to his vivid narrations of when he was with General Patton," Obi says. "I can relate to the World War II vets because I was alive then, and also my story around the Korean War and the Army-Navy-Marine Corps link. For me, the Forties and Fifties were the most memorable decades of my life."

STILL INNOVATIVE AFTER ALL THESE YEARS

"In the 1970s, I was one of the first plastic surgeons to use collagen. Of course, there are a lot of fillers out there now. In the area of plastic surgery, there are a lot of changes coming about. About every 10 years, I see a period of accelerated growth, and I am especially seeing that now," Obi says, referring to the current trend toward noninvasive techniques, stem cell research, and the new application of advanced lasers. "On the downside is the erosion of the solo practices in plastic surgery," he adds.

Obi has a lot to say about the future of the plastic surgery field and what he'd like to see on the horizon. "We adjust to change," he says. Being youthful in mind and spirit, he adds, is the capacity to adjust to change. "I have seen so many changes come about over the last decade. I have been performing fat grafting for 25 years. Within the last 3 or 4 years, adipose-derived stem cells is the hottest new procedure in our specialty. There is too much 'pseudo-science' on both the aesthetic and reconstructive side of plastic surgery. As leaders in the field of plastic surgery, we need to back up our techniques with R&D. We are all acquainted with microsurgery that has now made face transplants a more common procedure. Working on a more cellular level, especially in the area of stem cell research, I see the regeneration of tissues and organs not a too distant reality.

"In the US, advances in the safety and efficacy of breast implants [have become] stagnant," he notes. "I treat many breast cancer patients, and I would like to see more in this area. Other countries have taken the lead due to stringent limitations inherent in our legal system and the FDA. One reason fat grafting has become so popular is that we still do not have suitable breast implants for many lumpectomy and mastectomy patients, and autologous flaps are excessively invasive. That needs to improve.

"In cosmetic surgery, we are developing many less invasive techniques. In place of performing a full face and neck lift, I am

now performing short incision midfacial rejuvenations in conjunction with laser tightening of the neck, and using concentrated stem cell fat as a large volume 'space lifting' maneuver. My 25-year-old invention of lifting the tail of the brow is performed in 5 minutes and avoids the distortion of the lengthy forehead and endoscopic lifts. I have completed

this procedure on approximately 5,000 brows. Today, patients are going home with a complimentary handheld personal laser for a month, which helps treat residual wrinkles and speed the healing process." ■

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