

# From the Vietnam War to India – and into the Maliniac Circle

BY KENDRA Y. MIMS

**D**avid Leber, MD, Harrisburg, Pa., discovered plastic surgery through his passion for the arts and painting. During his senior year in high school, he created a life-sized science fair project of the human body to illustrate the internal organs. Several subsequent conversations with his family doctor about medicine and the human anatomy inspired his enrollment in medical school.

Dr. Leber attended Temple University School of Medicine in Philadelphia, where he continued creating medical illustrations through sketchings and paintings. As an artist, he enjoys working with his hands, and he says watching plastic surgeons perform hand surgery and cleft-lip procedures in the O.R. during his junior year confirmed his career path as a plastic surgeon.

"I was immediately sold on becoming a plastic surgeon," he says. "The anatomy of the hand, and the cleft lip and palate procedures they performed, fascinated me; I knew plastic surgery was the career for me."

## Called to serve

Dr. Leber signed up for the U.S. Army as an intern during the Vietnam War. Although he hoped to serve as a medical illustrator at the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, Dr. Leber was sent to Vietnam in 1968 for one year and completed his remaining two years of active duty at a hospital in San Francisco.

He was invited back to Temple University to become a part of its residency program when his military service ended. After completing a combined program in plastic surgery and general surgery over a six-year period, Dr. Leber trained residents in the plastic surgery department for one year before joining a private practice in Harrisburg in 1978 with two local plastic surgeons.

Dr. Leber primarily specialized in cleft lip and palate surgery, as well as microtia and ear reconstruction, for nearly 40 years before retiring in December 2016. He says treating patients with craniofacial disorders encouraged him to volunteer his surgical skills and expertise in the service of underprivileged patients in developing countries. To date, Dr. Leber has participated in 38 surgical mission trips with Interplast, Resurge, World Surgical Foundation and Operation Medical, and he's traveled to nine countries – including India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Philippines and Honduras – to perform cleft lip and palate surgery, and to teach doctors and residents surgical techniques to perform ear reconstruction.

"I would spend one week at a time in these countries operating, teaching and providing lectures on how to remove cartilage from the rib cage, carve it into the shape of the ear framework and place it underneath the skin," says Dr. Leber, who undertook his last mission trip to India in 2015. "I'd return to the same countries six months later for another week to review the work that had

been done and complete the second stage of the ear reconstruction.

"The people there are so grateful," he continues. "The parents hand over their child to us, and they trust us. They have tears in their eyes when they see their child trans-

more in cash or securities or provided a minimum \$100,000 deferred gift through life insurance, a bequest or trust. He was inducted into the Maliniac Circle during Plastic Surgery The Meeting 2017 in Orlando. Dr. Leber says he's always admired

Dr. Leber encourages his colleagues to give back and become a Maliniac Fellow as a way to advance the specialty and create opportunities for the future generation of plastic surgeons.

"We've been the innovators of so many things due to research," Dr. Leber says. "Our entire specialty depends on information, education and research. When I attend local meetings and our national meetings today, I see residents and young plastic surgeons conducting research on things we've never dreamed of. I'm amazed at the work they're doing."

"It's important that our specialty keep moving in a progressive direction," he adds. "Innovation is the essential core of plastic surgery, and it has advanced my career. That's my inspiration to contribute to The PSF."

**Why wait?**  
As Dr. Leber reflects on his 38-year career in plastic surgery, he says he's grateful for the opportunities the specialty has provided him. Although he's enjoying his life as an artist and a retired plastic surgeon, Dr. Leber is still invested in the specialty's future.

## Why wait?

"I'm proud to call myself a plastic surgeon," he says. "Over a period of 38 years, you see a lot. Time flies and you don't realize it until you look back and see what you've accomplished. You don't always realize how much this means to people who undergo cosmetic or reconstructive surgery."

"I've enjoyed being able to do cleft lip and palate work on young children, because this is going to affect them for the rest of their lives," Dr. Leber continues. "I have a drawer filled with thank-you cards stating how I changed the lives of so many people by doing what plastic surgeons do every day. It's extremely gratifying. As a Maliniac Fellow it's good to know that I can still help to advance the specialty while I'm still living. Why wait?"

For more information on the Maliniac Circle and how you can become a Maliniac Fellow, visit [theapsf.org/maliniac](http://theapsf.org/maliniac).



David Leber, MD, (clockwise from top) lectures physicians about ear reconstruction in India; provides hands-on teaching for ear reconstruction students in Bangladesh; and poses (eighth from left) with staff, patients and family members after surgery work in India. Dr. Leber has participated in 38 surgical mission trips and traveled to nine countries.

formed after their reconstructive surgery. Many times, these children – especially in the Philippines – can't go to school if they have a cleft lip because they're shunned by their peers. We've treated adults in their 40s who've never had their cleft lip repaired. Often, they've never had a chance to undergo an operation to fix their cleft lip until we arrived. It's exhausting work – but the rewards are tremendous."

## Making an impact

Although Dr. Leber has retired from plastic surgery and medical mission trips, he continues to make an impact on the specialty through his contributions to The PSF as a Maliniac Fellow. The Maliniac Circle is composed of plastic surgeons whose generosity provide resources that guarantee success for the future of the specialty. Dr. Leber became a Maliniac Fellow in 2017 through a cash donation – the most convenient way to provide immediate impact on the specialty.

Dr. Leber joins more than 100 Maliniac Fellows who have committed \$50,000 or

plastic surgeons who have joined the Maliniac Circle, and he adds he's proud that he can continue to make an impact on the specialty through The PSF.

"I'm almost 78, so I figured I should become a Maliniac Fellow now, and enjoy the benefits and satisfaction of making a difference while I'm still here," he says. "When it comes to my future and will, I have certain priorities such as my sons, church and grad-

## ASPS committee service is calling

The Society invites Active Members, Life Active Members, International Members and Candidates for Membership to apply to serve on one or more committees by logging into [plasticsurgery.org](http://plasticsurgery.org) and clicking on "My Account," then selecting the "Membership" tab followed by the "Committee Application" from the drop-down list.

Residents interested in committee service may refer to the special instructions on the "Residents & Fellows Forum Committees" page. Successful candidates will have the opportunity to improve the practice of plastic surgery by influencing health policy, research, quality issues, leadership and professional development, ethical behavior, and best practices for domestic and international service missions. The application deadline is 11:59 p.m. CDT April 30, 2018.

If you are interested in sharing your time and talent on an ASPS committee, please visit [plasticsurgery.org/committees](http://plasticsurgery.org/committees) to view frequently asked questions about committee service and other committee resources. You can also contact [ASPSCommittees@plasticsurgery.org](mailto:ASPSCommittees@plasticsurgery.org) with questions unanswered by the FAQs.