



A **Life-Changing** Gift Worth Sharing

Many lives are drastically transformed at the hands of surgeons daily. These stories make it past the walls of the hospitals, except to be repeated to family members and those closest to the patient.

In the Caribbean, even some of the most extraordinary cases never reach the spotlight. Medical miracles seldom make the front page.

One case in Antigua, however, received some attention late last year, after specialists were able to give a young man something as

simple, but essential, as the ability to open his mouth.

For 19-year-old Kelly Tuitt it was the gift of a lifetime, but the case also highlighted the central purpose of medicine, and demonstrated that contrary to popular belief, money doesn't always make the difference.

Dr Horace Griffith, one of the few maxillofacial surgeons practicing in the Caribbean, has been coming to Antigua to treat cases for the past seven years. He doesn't

advertise the full range of his services, but luckily, was referred by Dr Derek Marshall, who realized the need for drastic intervention in Tuitt's case.

The result was close to US\$100,000 worth of medical services, including the replacement of a jaw joint with an artificial implant, all at no cost to the patient.

"You have to either want to be here, or be from here," Dr Griffith says of his choice

to return to the Caribbean after graduating from Howard University and being fully qualified in the US. "There's a certain level of bureaucracy you have to deal with that it's sometimes difficult to tolerate. You're here to treat patients, not get caught up in all the red tape."

Dr Marshall concurs that issues such as the cost and availability of equipment and supplies, as well as a shortage of auxiliary staff and persons trained to repair medical equipment pose obstacles to attracting specialists, even those with ties to the region.

There are other pending restrictions as far as specialists' need to be registered to practice in individual territories to be able to assist patients throughout the region. That hurdle has been surmounted, in some instances by having the patient travel to the specialist, or in severe cases, applying for special permits and waivers.

Dr Griffith notes, "You don't practice medical dentistry thinking about money. All you have to do is make sure your skill, your craft is sound, so you can sleep well at night, and everything else will follow after that. If you are a skilled practitioner, folks are going

to seek you out."

Such was the case last September. Dr Marshall did not hesitate in contacting his former undergraduate colleague. "Medicine is so wide in scope that you have to utilize those referral basics in order to practice good medicine or good dentistry," he says. "Back in the day, you had one doctor who would treat you for everything, but now it's gotten to where you have so many specialists in so many different areas that you have to be aware of who you need to go to or send a patient to."

The Caribbean practitioners were, in turn, able to call up Dr Edward Zebovitz, another Howard alumnus, who mobilized connections which led to the donation of the transplant. Dr Zebovitz was also flown in and donated his skills during surgery.

"It's something that you study all these years for, and you get to a point where you want to be able to help somebody," Dr Griffith says. "You know not everyone can come to you in your office, and sometimes you have to step out of your office and give something back to someone."

It's meant, for Tuitt, the difference in

having to crush food and force it down his throat to being able, five months later, to lead a much more normal life. He'd been living with a fractured jaw since the age of seven. This subsequently resulted in unusual bone development, until his jaws could only separate about 3 cm.

Dr Griffith admits that prior to the donations, he and Dr Zebovitz had been about to split the cost of the procedure and the replacement among them. The surgical procedure lasted 11 hours.

Dr Marshall had met Tuitt's mom through the public health system, and says this case should also help others with specialized disorders recognize that there are avenues for accessing medical care.

He recounts, "This woman used to see me on the street and keep asking me, so when are we doing this? I knew how desperate she was. This guy can now live a normal life, whereas the prognosis prior to September 11 for him living like that for a long period of time would be diminished. To be able to help another human being in that respect is the whole heart of the story."