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Dr. Christopher Gordon performed reconstructive surgery on Erica Heimbrock at Cincinnati Children's Hospital. These are her "before" and "after" photos.

truly inspiring transformations

Vanity takes a back seat in the makeovers these doctors perform

By Sheryl Imhoff
Contributor

When you think of plastic surgery, you naturally think of face lifts, nose jobs and other cosmetic procedures. We're fascinated by the flurry of extreme makeover programs and cosmetic transformation reality shows.

But what about people whose lives have been truly transformed and the surgeons who perform these miracles?

Changing lives

Dr. Christopher B. Gordon is a faculty member of the University of Cincinnati division of plastic and reconstructive surgery serving Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center and Shriners Burns Institute. He specializes in cranial facial and pediatric plastic surgery and also performs adult cosmetic surgery.

Jenny Heimbrock of Delhi said she can't put into words how thankful she is to Gordon. At age 15, her daughter Erica's lower jaw stopped growing and Gordon performed distraction surgery.

In distraction surgery, a device is inserted that gradually lengthens the child's jaw and soft tissue by allowing additional bone growth to occur. "We crack the bones, stretch them out, and pull the chin and tongue forward," Gordon said. "This procedure has revolutionized the way we take care of children with these problems." Today, at age 17, Erica is doing well and feeling more confident and comfortable with herself.

"I also do a lot of pro bono work over-

seas," Gordon said. The first time he went on a trip to Guatemala, he operated on three girls with cleft lips all from one family. Because of their cultural beliefs, they were never let out of the house. He remembers how rewarding it was to see the oldest girl wake up after surgery, look into a mirror, and break into a huge smile.

surgery on a 17-year-old who moved here from the Congo.

"I was able to arrange for all the services to be donated for this patient," said Kurtzman. "This boy has been teased his whole life, never gone to school, never had friends. It's very rewarding to change a child's life with a 45-minute operation."

py, she knew she wanted breast reconstruction. A friend recommended Kitzmiller to her.

"I wanted the least invasive procedure possible," Rohrkemper said. "Dr. Kitzmiller suggested what he thought would be best for me and performed the reconstructive surgery."

Rohrkemper said she is pleased and comfortable with the outcome. "I feel good about myself and I'm glad I did it."

"I see my patients regularly during one of the most stressful times of their lives," said Kitzmiller. "Our office becomes a positive part of their recovery. We bond with them in a way that's not always seen with cosmetic surgery."

Dr. Kevin Yakuboff is the chief of plastic surgery at Cincinnati's Shriners Hospital for Children and an assistant professor of surgery at the University of Cincinnati.

Shriners Hospital is a non-profit, pediatric burn hospital committed to acute burn care and reconstructive surgery for children who have been burned. There is no charge to the patient or family for any of the medical care or services provided by Shriners Hospitals.

Shriners Hospital acts as a referral center. "We take care of children not only in our region but also from all over the world," Yakuboff said. "They leave healed, sometimes returning to us later in their lives for further surgery to release a tight joint or to camouflage scars."

Whether it's a child with a birth defect, a teenager injured in an accident, or an older adult with a tumor, reconstructive surgery is all about changing lives. And here in the Greater Cincinnati area, highly skilled surgeons and their courageous patients are creating life-altering transformations everyday.

COURTESY OF CINCINNATI CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL MEDICAL CENTER AND DAVID JOEL. PHOTOGRAPHY: Surgeons at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center perform delicate surgery on a patient.



Cosmetic vs. reconstructive surgery

Cosmetic surgery takes healthy people and tries to improve their looks or reverse the effects of aging. "The media has brought cosmetic surgery to the forefront," said Dr. Lawrence Kurtzman with The Plastic Surgery Group. "The most common procedures we do are face lifts, eye tucks, rhinoplasty (noses), liposuction, and breast enlargements."

According to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, reconstructive surgery is performed on atypical structures of the body caused by congenital problems, developmental differences, trauma, injury, infections, tumors or disease.

Kurtzman recently performed cleft lip

Healing the body and spirit

It's easy for Dr. John Kitzmiller, chief of plastic surgery at University Hospital, to relate to his patients.

"I had nasal skin cancer and had reconstructive flap surgery on my nose," said Kitzmiller.

"For reconstruction patients there is a deep vulnerability. Our goal is to restore them to the appearance and function they had before cancer. It's really a privilege to be part of their total recovery and to see them come back both physically and emotionally."

Teresa Rohrkemper of Anderson was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2002. After her mastectomy and chemothera-