

A Pledge for Better

A Book Review of
SECOND LIVES, SECOND CHANCES: A SURGEON'S STORIES OF
TRANSFORMATION. By Donald R. Laub. ECW Press, 2019. 184 pages.
Hardcover \$24.95

Jenny Hua
Brown University

Plastic surgery is often regarded as a more frivolous branch of medicine, with a reputation that indicates an abundance of superficiality. There exists an implicit bias, that doctors who pursue this field are “in it for the money”, or of shallow worth. Dr. Laub blows these assumptions out of the water as he tells the remarkable story of his life in his new book, *Second Lives, Second Chances*.

He opens his book stating, “I became a doctor because my father didn’t, and I became a plastic and reconstructive surgeon because of a maroon Cadillac, a bunch of high school bullies who threatened to beat the crap out of me, and an embarrassing DIY tattoo.” His relatively spare descriptive style lends itself to pulling the reader in, weighing all of his anecdotes thoughtfully, looking for meaning behind his stories. Fights? Tattoos? In a Midwestern Catholic boy?

His timeline is largely chronologic, but he does jump backwards and forwards sometimes, skipping from his teen experiences at age 16, to college, then back to the Boy Scouts, interspersed with his initial pledge to God experience while searching for a wolf pack as a child. This keeps the reader on their toes, both trying to connect the stories chronologically as well as metaphorically, but does interrupt the flow of the writing in the early chapters. Once he is firmly in storytelling mode during his adult life, the writing is smooth, engaging, and fascinating.

His role as one of the leading surgeons in Gender Confirmation Surgery during the early days of the procedure provide a plethora of anecdotes, not only of the medical cases, but also of his patients who become lifelong friends, as well as the politics behind the scenes occurring during that time. His second simultaneous career as a volunteer global plastic surgeon, who ultimately turns his missions into the massive worldwide recognized organization Interplast, is equally incredible, rich with absorbing tales of patient cases, mission difficulties, and the political ramifications of prioritizing the poor vs giving aid to all people. He delves into teachings of the Pope, liberation theology, and even Aristotle vs Plato. Occasionally an extended musing or anecdote is confusing or dissonant and does not obviously add to his overall life story, but for the most part, these are few and far in between.

Dr. Laub details his journey through his varied multiple careers, sprinkled with supremely entertaining anecdotes about his professional and personal life, and how the two intersected. Just as incredible as the transformations that he performs on his gender dysphoria patients, are the transformations that he himself undergoes. He never loses sight of his core strengths as a boy who always “goes overboard” and “rarely felt guilty about anything”. His growth from a conservative Catholic boy raised in the Midwest to the preeminent Gender Confirmation Surgeon in the US, if not world, as well as his role as the founder of Interplast/ReSurge, are a testament to his true self-described core strength, that of helping those in need while continually striving to be the best, no matter what the goal. This is a worthy and fascinating read for anyone interested in medicine, surgery, LGBTQ issues, global and “office” politics, and ultimately, provides knowledgeable entertainment.