

# Healing Hands

Ben Carson overcame tough odds to become one of the world's top neurosurgeons

> He was, by his own admission, a horrible student.

It was just one of many hurdles blocking Benjamin Carson's path to success. Anger issues and low self-esteem also ranked. And, of course, there were other obstacles—growing up poor as the son of a single mother who had only a third-grade education and another son to provide for.

Carson's rise from poor and quick-tempered inner-city Detroit teenager to internationally renowned pediatric neurosurgeon has catapulted him into the spotlight—in a made-for-television movie on TNT, in books, in numerous television interviews—and garnered him countless awards, including the nation's highest civilian award, the 2008 Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Best known as the first physician to successfully separate conjoined twins connected at the back of the head,



once tried to attack his mother with a hammer and, later, attempted to stab a friend during a fight over a radio station. The knife's blow was deflected by the young man's belt buckle, so no harm was done. But Carson walked away shaken.

Terrified of his own actions, Carson

University of Michigan, where he made a fascinating self-discovery: While his temper once proved unsteady, his hands never did.

"I became acutely aware of an unusual ability—a divine gift, I believe—of extraordinary eye and hand coordination," Carson wrote in his autobiography, *Gifted Hands*. "It's my belief that God gives us all gifts ... and the gift of eye and hand coordination has been an invaluable asset in surgery. This gift [encompasses] the ability to understand physical relationships, to think in three dimensions. Good surgeons must understand the consequences of each action, for they're often not able to see what's happening on the other side of the area in which they're actually working."

After medical school, Carson accepted a neurosurgery residency at Johns Hopkins Hospital. When his training

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Carson has traveled the world performing separations that most believed impossible. Meanwhile, as his successes gained attention, his personal story began to resonate as well.

Often, in that narrative, it is the violent and unmanageable temper of his adolescence that plays one of the most defining roles. By his own account, he

realized he had to gain better control of his temper and himself. Having long dreamed of becoming a physician, Carson decided to immerse himself in his studies. He graduated from high school with honors and then worked his way through Yale University, where he earned a degree in psychology. He continued on to medical school at the

was finished, he began work as a neurosurgeon at Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital in Australia. A year later in 1984, he returned to Hopkins, where, at age 33, he was appointed director of pediatric neurosurgery. From there, his accomplishments continued mounting.

In 1987, Carson made history when he successfully separated 7-month-old twins Patrick and Benjamin Binder, who were joined at the head. The surgery, which took 22 hours and a team of 70 doctors, nurses and other support staff, was the first in a long series of separation procedures. In a career filled with operations that most surgeons would never dare attempt, not every case was as successful. "Every time a patient dies, I'll probably carry an emotional scar just as people receive an emotional wound when a family member dies," Carson has said. "As I look back on my own history of surgery

and the work we do at Hopkins, I remind myself that thousands would have died if we hadn't operated."

Aside from his work with conjoined twins, Carson has broken medical ground in other ways. He was the first surgeon to perform an intrauterine procedure to relieve pressure on the brain of a hydrocephalic fetal twin. He is also known for his pioneering work in radical hemispherectomies—removing a portion of the brain to restore quality of life for patients with profound epilepsy.

In 2002, Carson was diagnosed with prostate cancer, and he cut back his workload significantly. Today he is cancer-free and still performs about 300 surgeries each year. He also has written several books, including *Think Big: Unleashing Your Potential for Excellence*, which offers advice for success.

Today, the neurosurgeon who got his start on the tough streets of Detroit

actively works to inspire disadvantaged young people through the Carson Scholars Fund. The nonprofit, which he founded with Candy, his wife of more than 30 years, awards scholarships to children in grades 4 through 11 who exemplify academic excellence.

And, prompted by the way that reading transformed his own life, Carson and his wife also have established the Ben Carson Reading Project, which provides funding and support to schools to build and maintain Ben Carson Reading Rooms—warm, inviting spots "where kids can escape into the world of books."

"Knowledge is the key that unlocks all the doors," Carson writes in *Think Big*. "You can be green-skinned with yellow polka dots and come from Mars, but if you have knowledge that people need, instead of beating you, they'll beat a path to your door." ■

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