

The Tennessee Craniofacial Center

By Brian Beise

Before Michael Beise was born, a sonogram revealed his cleft lip. His parents learned that this could indicate other problems, and as they started looking at what to do for a baby born with craniofacial deformities, they came across one name again and again: Dr. Larry Sargent in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

“We even had a couple of people tell us that he is the best doctor for baby faces that they have ever encountered,” says Angela Beise, Michael’s mother. “We contacted his office even before Michael was born and started reading through their materials.”

Michael was born with a cluster of midline deformities, including a complete cleft lip and palate. Genetic testing showed he was missing a piece of the “q” portion of his 18th chromosome, and as he spent his first days in neonatal intensive care, specialists told his parents the child was deaf, dumb, and blind, and that he would never walk. As they learned to tube feed their fourth child, the Beises struggled to adjust to this dark outlook.

When Michael was 5 days old, a local plastic surgeon from the area visited the family. When he had examined the child, he only had one name for the Beises: Dr. Larry Sargent, a plastic and reconstructive surgeon. Three days later, they were on a plane to Chattanooga, where everything changed.

“The first difference we noticed was that the nurses all called our son by his name, not the ‘Beise Baby,’” Angela recalls. “They seemed to see a beautiful little boy and not a deformed face. I will never be able to put into words the comfort and peace that brought to us.”

At Erlanger, Dr. Larry Sargent looked at all of Michael’s records from the hospital in Mississippi and ordered that his tests be redone. The new tests revealed that the boy was neither deaf, dumb, nor blind. The Beises were told that Michael could likely learn to walk, and with a specialized bottle, they were able to feed their son normally for the first time. Dr. Sargent had not yet operated on Michael’s face, and already the infant’s life was improving.

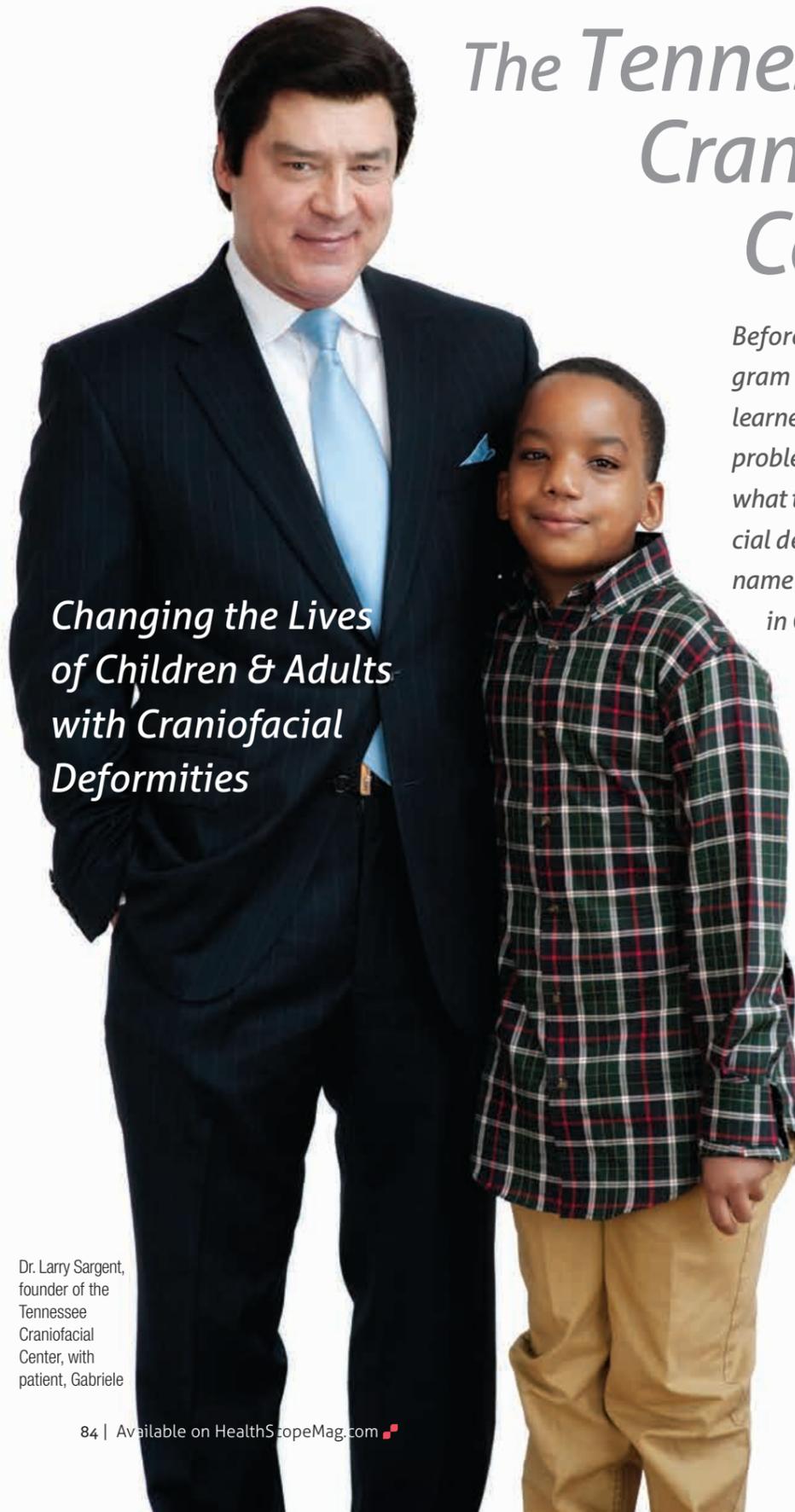
Michael is one of thousands of patients helped by the Tennessee Craniofacial Center (TCC) at Children’s Hospital at Erlanger and Erlanger Medical Center. Dr. Sargent started the center in 1987 after moving to Chattanooga to join the Plastic Surgery Group. When he learned the region was underserved when it came to his specialty, craniofacial surgery, he built a team of physicians and specialists to offer a multi-disciplinary team approach.

Currently, the multi-disciplinary team consists of Dr. Tim Strait, neurosurgeon; Dr. Tim Cox, pedodontist; Dr. Chris St. Charles, ENT; Susie Keith, audiologist; Claire Overmyer, speech therapist; as well as pediatricians and pediatric anesthesiologists to ensure holistic treatment for patients of the TCC.

In addition to cleft lips and palates, the TCC treats craniosynostosis, microtia, syndromes including Apert, Treacher-Collins, and Crouzon, as well as facial injuries. Most of the TCC team has worked together for more than 25 years. They know and trust one another, and have developed a reputation for providing coordinated and unified treatment across disciplines.

Soon after the TCC was created, Dr. Sargent recognized the need to support low-income patients in need of operations. To that end, the Craniofacial Foundation of America (CFA) was established in 1989 to help qualified patients who travel to Chattanooga for treatment. While approximately 75% of the patients are from Tennessee, patients have come from over forty states and several foreign countries.

Among the CFA’s initiatives is “Dreams Can Come True” Family Camp, a weekend for patients and their families to come together, share their journeys, and have fun. “There are no stares or comments,” says Terry



Changing the Lives of Children & Adults with Craniofacial Deformities

Dr. Larry Sargent, founder of the Tennessee Craniofacial Center, with patient, Gabriele



Dr. Sargent with patient, Layla



Elisea, before & after



Pryia, before & after

RYKER,
before & after

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Smyth, executive director of the CFA. "The activities we offer help to build self-esteem, confidence, and teamwork, allowing the children to enjoy activities that they would normally shy away from in the outside world. We have moms time, dads time, sibling time, where those groups come together to talk about issues they are having or milestones they have reached. I use this time to listen and try to understand what it is that the CFA can do to help make their journeys a little easier, whether the problems are emotional, physical, or monetary." The CFA also hosts a mother's retreat and "Project Happy Faces," a series of mission trips Dr. Sargent has led to places such as Mexico, Peru, and Panama.



Dr. Sargent with patient, Elijah

In addition to his practice, Dr. Sargent serves as professor and chair of the department of plastic surgery at the University of Tennessee College of Medicine in Chattanooga, and works to make advances in the field of craniofacial surgery. He has written and lectured extensively on advances in operative techniques in the field, given over 150 national presentations, and writ-

ten over 90 publications on the subject. The innovative techniques of the TCC have recently appeared on the front cover of the *Annals of Plastic Surgery* on the treatment of multiple craniosynostosis.

Colleagues marvel at the skill of Dr. Sargent's hands and the dedication of his practice, while photographs of his patients before and after surgery show lives drastically improved. One of these is Angela Beise. "Michael has had surgeries on other

parts of his body in hospitals all over the country," she says. "I can say with all honesty that the care he, and we, got at Erlanger is the best care he has ever received. His repair is beautiful and without a visible scar."

"I feel very fortunate to have the ability to do something I thoroughly enjoy," says Dr. Sargent. "This is a very demanding field, but I expect a lot of myself and I demand a lot, so from that standpoint I get a great deal of satisfaction in doing this. The rewards are tremendous in terms of changing people's lives and being able to correct a deformity or restoring an injured patient, giving them a second chance."

Looking at Michael, who will turn 19 this year, no one would guess the deformities he had at birth. "My son would not have been able to eat normally without the amazing work of the Tennessee Craniofacial Center, and he would not have the beautiful face that he has today," Angela says. "We are forever grateful for the work of the craniofacial team and the staff of Erlanger Hospital."



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