

A new model for transforming lives, **one face at a time**

Performing adult rhinoplasty, blepharoplasty and neck and eyebrow lifts is Thomas Romo, MD's bread and butter. Transforming children who have facial deformities provides a different kind of reward.

After volunteering with several nonprofits overseas, Dr. Romo noticed flaws in how the organizations functioned.

"We'd repair a cleft lip, but not address the underlying bone issues, and then we'd leave," he said. "Many of the kids ended up with Eustachian tube dysfunction because that was not addressed. It just wasn't a comprehensive treatment plan. I left very disappointed.

"I came back to New York and realized that I know a lot of phenomenal doctors here. But they can't go overseas for weeks at a time."

Dr. Romo recruited friends and colleagues to assist such children in New York and launched the Little Baby Face Foundation. There are 40 specialists on the medical advisory board, and the group provides the kind of care Dr. Romo envisioned.

The foundation works with a new, multidisciplinary paradigm, he said. "A group of physicians from all different specialties — top people in their fields — discuss these cases and how to approach them. There is no other place where you get to do that."

The Little Baby Face Foundation treats children for free when families qualify. All of the physicians donate their consultation and operating room time at Lenox Hill Hospital. The foundation pays for each patient and a guardian to travel to New York and covers housing costs at Ronald McDonald House for their stay.

"I tell parents that their fee is to go home and tell people — in person, on social media — that we helped them. I ask them to let other people know that this kind of help is available," Dr. Romo said. The nonprofit has performed more than 500 surgical procedures for children in the U.S. and abroad since 2002.



Dr. Romo, third from right, meets with fellow volunteers from the Little Baby Face Foundation.

Benefits for everyone

Children have traveled from as far away as Malaysia and Ethiopia, but 80 percent live in the U.S. “There is no shortage right here of kids who need our help. We don’t have to go overseas to make a difference doing this work. We’ve even treated kids from New York City,” said Dr. Romo. “It’s an incredible opportunity to work right in our own community.”

He quickly pointed out that the children aren’t the only ones who benefit. “We take on incredibly complex cases, as complicated as they get,” he said. “This work allows us to push the limits of reconstructive surgery. It makes us better surgeons. It allows us to expose our residents and fellows to innovative work. It gives us chances to publish academically. We’re all winning.”

Limitless potential

Little Baby Face treats about 50 children per year, but there are many other children who need facial reconstructive surgery. Dr. Romo’s long-term goal is to establish satellite medical teams around the country to do the same.

“I think that most physicians are physicians because they care about people,” he said. “We love to take care of patients. This is taking that to the extreme, and I think it’s something a lot of doctors would like to do.”

Even more than performing cutting-edge work and fixing faces, the foundation helps each child build a life and a future: “We are empowering children who have been marginalized and bullied, and restoring their self-esteem and self-confidence. There is no better work than that.”



One of Little Baby Face’s most recent patients is Jared Galicia of Passaic, NJ. This 12-year-old has facial deformities due to Treacher Collins syndrome, a spontaneous birth defect affecting one in 50,000 children that stunts bone development. The condition has also significantly impacted Jared’s hearing: He was born with no external ears and has no ear canals. Over the past year, Dr. Romo used cartilage from Jared’s ribs to reconstruct ears for him. Jared can now wear his hearing aids over his new ears. In the future, Dr. Romo will perform surgery to fill in Jared’s cheeks and chin as well.