

Modesto Bee, The (CA) ATHLETE'S SHATTERED FACE REBUILT

EX-MANTECA WRESTLER FOUND DOCTOR NEARBY Published August 28, 2002 Section: A Edition(s): FIRST Page: A1 By: *KEN CARLSON, BEE STAFF WRITER*

Jacob Harris, a former Manteca High School wrestler, never thought he would go to a plastic surgeon.

That was until a dirt clod thrown at a party in rural Manteca struck his right eye, shattering the socket and cheekbone and breaking his nose.

In the past year, he has undergone three reconstructive surgeries on the right side of his face. Screws, plates and other artificial material were used in the procedures, as well as cosmetic touches, to restore his natural appearance. "I really don't even notice it anymore," Harris said, referring to the hardware under his facial skin.

He said he is leaning against additional surgery that would eliminate a scar and a slight depression on the right side of his face.

"I don't see any reason to," he said. "I'm pretty comfortable with it."

Harris, 22, did not have to go far to find a doctor to rebuild his face.

His surgeon, Dr. Robert Gray, has a practice in Manteca. He holds credentials in facial plastic and reconstructive surgery from the University of California at San Francisco and in head and neck surgery from Emory University in Atlanta.

Gray said most patients see him to have wrinkles removed or to change other aspects of their appearance.

Others, such as Harris, have needed his services to recover from and correct the disfigurements of traumatic injuries.

Gray has even worked on inmates, to repair their battered mugs, at Doctors Hospital of Manteca, which has a contract with the state Department of Corrections.

"One time, the leader of a gang was flown down from Pelican Bay (State Prison) with 12 guards. He couldn't breathe through his nose because he had been in so many fights."

Gray opened the skin of the prisoner's nose, lifted off the nasal framework and rebuilt it with a graft of cartilage taken from the man's rib cage.

"He was a nice guy," Gray said. "He appreciated the work, and I never wanted to see him again."

For the most part, the doctor sees people who are on the right side of the law. It might be a baby boomer who wants to conceal the signs of age or a child who gets teased for his oversized ears.

"The face is one of your most important assets," Gray said. "It's out there for people to see. If your face is deformed, people are going to treat you differently."

Gray, who spent his childhood in Michigan and Arizona, said he was attracted to plastic surgery when he went to medical school.

The profession requires a great deal of precision, as the head and neck contain more nerves than any other part of the body.

Gray set up a practice in Manteca four years ago, after seeing a need for his services in the Northern San Joaquin Valley.

"I am really, really busy," he said. "I have been busy from day one."

One morning last year, Gray was doing an operation in Tracy when a call came from St. Dominic's Hospital about a patient who possibly had been blinded in the right eye. That was Harris.

Doctors suspected that Harris' collapsed eye socket was putting pressure on the nerve that runs between the eyeball and the brain.

"You have an hour to get in and decompress the eye" or permanent blindness might result, Gray said. "His eye socket and cheekbone were not only broken, they were in Humpty Dumpty pieces."

After wrapping up the surgery in Tracy, Gray went to see Harris in the Manteca hospital and sought advice from a local ophthalmologist.

It turned out that Harris had a punctured retina, which left him with only peripheral vision in the eye.

After the swelling receded, Gray operated to rebuild the eye socket with titanium plates and screws.

A second surgery corrected double vision and, in a third operation, Gray filled out Harris' cheek by slipping artificial materials under the skin.

Harris had hoped to wrestle for a college team in Southern California, but his wrestling days are over.

As he recovered, perhaps the hardest part was enduring the stares from people, he said.

"I work for a restaurant, and people just stare and ask what happened," he said. "I'm used to it now. When you have to tell the story over and over again, you want to start making up stuff."

Harris suffered what is known as a "blow-out" injury, which sometimes is not easy for doctors to detect.

Kevin Tirapelle, 15, of Stockton was hit in the eye during a baseball game and went six weeks before being referred to Gray's office.

Gray said a broken cheekbone was pushing out the skin on the right side of the teen-ager's face. The doctor said he had to pry the bones loose to reset them.

Kevin should be able to play baseball next season, Gray said. (AL GOLUB / THE BEE)

Jacob Harris, 22, hardly notices the metal implanted under his facial skin anymore. In fact, he is leaning against further surgery.

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