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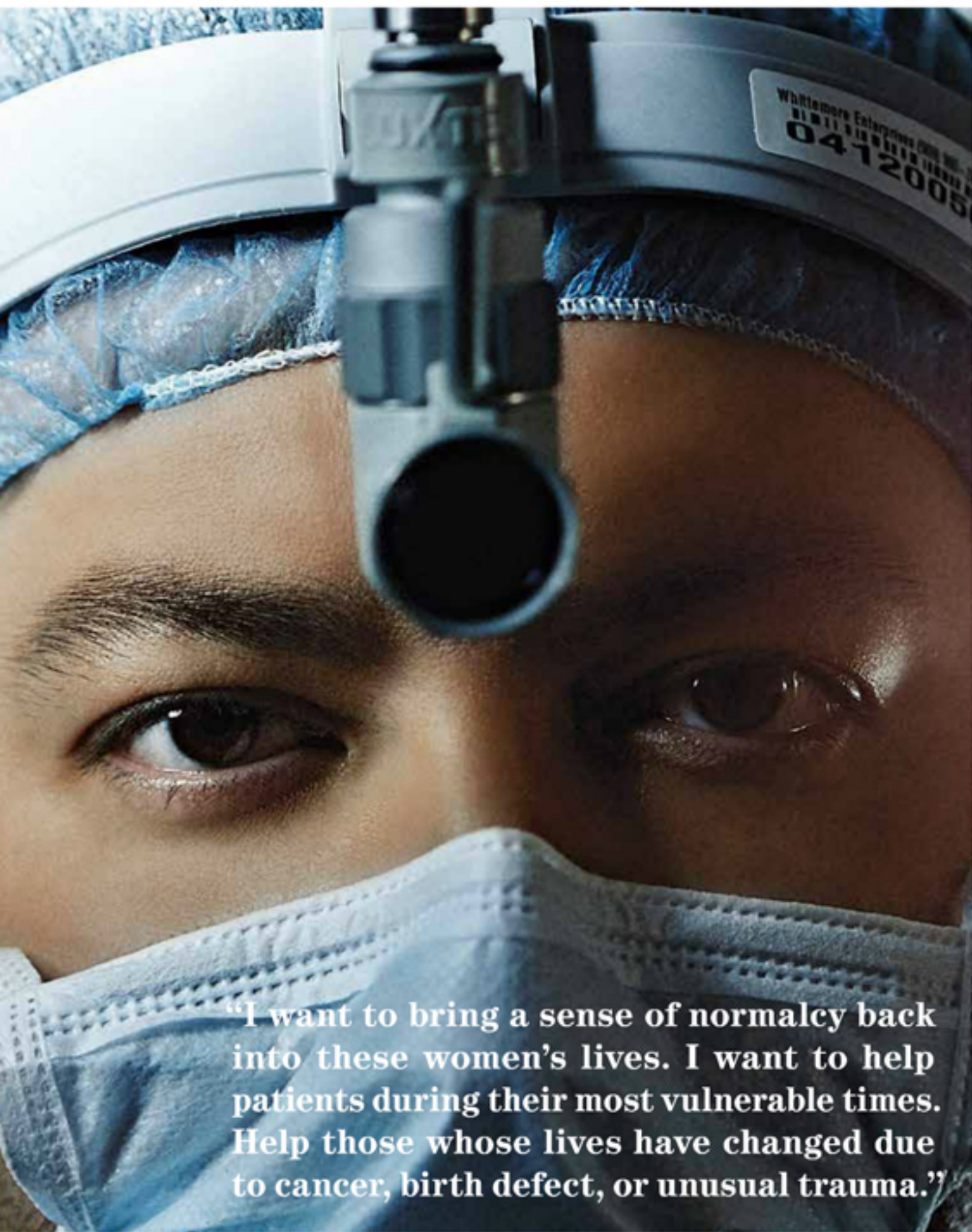
Working Together for Good

DR. ALI TEHRANI IS A FRONT-LINE WARRIOR FOR WOMEN IN CRISIS

— *By Tere Kidd*

Dr. Tehrani had never met Los Angeles artist Lilli Muller, but he had met Naomi Oyadomari, his patient. Naomi had been diagnosed with breast cancer. She was one of his many patients who would have reconstructive surgery at the time of her mastectomy. How she would deal with it was anything but the usual.

Like many of his patients who were trying to make sense of her diagnosis, Naomi was seeking answers. Perhaps the last place she expected to find them were in the combination of art, technology and the right doctor.



"I want to bring a sense of normalcy back into these women's lives. I want to help patients during their most vulnerable times. Help those whose lives have changed due to cancer, birth defect, or unusual trauma."



ARTIST LILLI MULLER

A diagnosis of breast cancer can be devastating, unreal, debilitating. It's that Alice in Wonderland feeling that you've just fallen into a very deep, dark hole with no more illumination than a match stick to help you climb out. And, no magic potion to help you fit through the key hole into the light that awaits on the other side of the door.

Associated with the Art Pink Warriors Project, artist Lilli Muller does full body casts of women and then uses them as canvases. When she and Oyadomari got together, Muller brought support to Dr. Tehrani's breast cancer patients by making upper-body casts of each woman. She allowed the women to choose a before-surgery or after-surgery cast. Then the women decorated their own body casts.

Plastic surgery isn't all about face lifts and breast augmentation; it's, also, about helping people find their way out of the dark after a dramatic trauma. Dr. Tehrani says, "Older breast cancer patients respond differently than younger ones. They have the same concerns, but seem to adjust better. For a woman in her 30s through 40s, the diagnosis is dire. For an older woman the trauma is still there, but she seems to be more capable of handling it."

"I want to bring a sense of normalcy back into these women's lives," says Dr. Tehrani. "I want to help patients during their most vulnerable times. Help those whose lives have changed due to cancer, birth defect, or unusual trauma."

Formerly, when patients had mastectomies, they would have the reconstructive surgery 6 to 12 months later. That meant the trauma of surgery was twice visited upon the patient and months of disfigurement. Dr. Tehrani works with a team of surgeons who have diagnosed their patients with breast cancer. These doctors refer their patients to Dr. Tehrani for reconstructive surgery at the time of the mastectomy. There is only one surgery not two, and the patient is already on the road to recovery without facing another surgery months later.



Dr. Tehrani saw the benefit Oyadomari derived from Muller's castings, and decided to put it all together... the reconstructive surgery - done in a timely manner - and the celebration of life.

In May this year, he gave a gala inviting his breast cancer patients and all the doctors involved in the patient's treatment. And, he invited Muller who displayed her art. It was a synthesis of what is right with patient care, the best science, the transformation of art when it helps to heal, and the celebration of life.

When asked why plastic surgery, Dr. Tehrani replies, "it's the sense of creativity. Surgical principles, aesthetics, and function are all involved."

Once a year in January, Dr. Tehrani joins a team of doctors who travel to either the Dominican Republic or Kenya to do pro bono work for two weeks. Conditions are primitive; oftentimes, tents are used to house surgeries and sleeping quarters. The team goes for two weeks doing up to 123 surgeries in four and a half days. All together there are usually 35 to 40 doctors who travel to remote areas where other medical care is scarce. The work is done through the Paul Chester Children's Hope Foundation.

SURVIVING AND THRIVING

Naomi Oyadomari's Journey to there and back again

There are two things Naomi Oyadomari would like everyone to know: The first is that cancer is not a death sentence. The second is that she would like everyone to know that self-examination of the breast is a true life saver.

In August of 2011, she had her yearly mammogram. The results came back negative. It was one thing off her mind for at least another year. She was comfy and happy with the world, until it came crashing down upon her. She and her boyfriend, T Smith, were cuddling and watching television one day when he discovered a lump in her breast. That was October of 2011. At first she brushed it off; after all her mammogram had detected nothing. The results had been negative. But, then she decided to heed Smith's urging that she have it checked. She had a second mammogram and a sonogram. In November of the same year, she was diagnosed with stage 1B cancer. That diagnosis indicated the growth was the size of a pea.

She underwent radiation treatment for 30 days, five days a week. It burned and was painful. Her next step was a huge decision. Radiation wasn't working and the other two choices were a lumpectomy or the more radical mastectomy. She described the cancer as feeling she had something foreign in her body and she wanted it out. "I wanted to be normal again," she recalls thinking.

She decided to have the mastectomy, and in January of 2012, Dr. Ajanwachuku, her oncologist, proceeded with the surgery. Her saving grace came in the form of a plastic surgeon, Dr. Ali Tehrani. When Dr. Ajanwachuku finished with the mastectomy, Dr. Tehrani immediately began the reconstruction of her breast. The idea of beginning reconstruction at the time of the mastectomy is relatively new, but doing it at the time of the surgery saves having another surgery months later.

At this time, Dr. Tehrani put an expander in her breast and inflated it.

"It felt something like a water balloon," Oyadomari explained. Every three weeks she left her home in Big Bear and descended the mountain for another injection of a saline solution. Going home the solution would expand and driving down the hill it deflated, somewhat.

"When life gives you cancer you get new boobs," she jokes.

To make her breasts symmetrical Dr. Tehrani put silicone implants in both breasts. "It was about feeling normal again," she emphasized.

What made the process even close to tolerable was Dr. Tehrani. "He always joked; he kept it lively. I could tell he really cared."

However, when she went home and got herself into bed, it was a different story. All alone the day before her 50th birthday, and experiencing great discomfort the tears poured out.

Nipple and areola replacement came in early 2013, another difficult process but necessary if she was going to feel whole again.

Before her first surgery Oyadomari had met a Los Angeles artist



named Lilli Muller. Muller is well known for her full-body plaster casts that she makes of women. When the casts have dried, she paints them. Muller cast Oyadomari in a cast from her waist up before her surgery. She gives these cancer patients the choice of casting before their surgeries or after. Oyadomari chose to have hers done before her surgeries. She never suspected what an awakening that would be.

"I'm claustrophobic so I didn't know if I would be able to do it, but I did and it felt like a rebirth. When they removed the cast, I felt alive; I felt different. We all hugged each other and cried. It was a healing experience. Symbolic of my metamorphosis. My daughter, Sierra Hood is an art student at Santa Monica City College. She covered it (the cast) in a montage of photographs."

All of this came together – the art, the science, the breast cancer survivors – in a gala given by Dr. Tehrani. The casts were on exhibit, women shared their stories. About 30 doctors came to the gala, and all but two of the 30 survivors came. "Dr. Tehrani really cares about his patients," Oyadomari declares. "I've met a lot of good people on this journey." – *By Tere Kidd*