

Farewell, Air Force, Shalom Beachwood

Orthodox plastic surgeon exchanges military career for private practice, ability to observe Sabbath

BY TED S. STRATTON

Dr. Robert Rossio doesn't need to sleep in his office anymore. In fact, he's sleeping better now than he has in years. The 51-year-old plastic surgeon recently ended his 20-year career with the Air Force to go into private practice.

The training he received in the military was great, but the work could be unsettling, says the University Heights doctor who treated his share of young men with devastating war injuries.

During the First Gulf War, Rossio was working at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland. Casualties from Iraq were flown there from bases in Germany to be treated by experienced military physicians. The most severe disfigurement cases came to Rossio and his reconstructive surgery team.

Some of the Marines had their legs blown off; others had chunks ripped from their flesh. One particular soldier had lost all of the soft tissue from the back of his ankle. Using a graft technique, Rossio was able to take skin from the man's tattoo-covered back and sew it on to the affected ankle area. The grateful Marine now has "MOM" written across his foot, but at least it is attached.

A consummate professional, Rossio says he tried not to let his emotions affect his work. "You have to deal with it in a professional way – you can't sit around afterwards and cry about it." But, he



Dr. Robert Rossio is enjoying civilian life.

admits, "it does hit you at some level. It hurts to see these young men go through this for their country."

Born and raised in Cleveland Heights and Beachwood, Rossio chose to join the Air Force at the end of his surgical residency in order to gain experience. After shuttling for years between bases in New Mexico, Texas and Ohio, he ended up at the prestigious naval hospital in Bethesda for a 13-year stint.

Like all doctors who join the service, Rossio was initially commissioned as a Captain. He retired with the rank of Air Force Lieutenant Colonel, commander of a small corps of medics and trainees. He credits the armed forces for providing him with the kind of training you can't get in the private sector.

In civilian hospitals, he says, you only have one attending physician per patient. But in the military sector, there is full access to all patients, no matter what the assignment.

The patients are not just 18 to 30-year-old men like most people would think, adds Rossio. You also take care of their dependents, the retired military and veterans. In the course of his service, he has treated those as young as newborn and as old as 100.

But it's tough being an Orthodox surgeon in a hospital environment, he says. In fact, it's virtually impossible to observe the Sabbath and still keep up with your duties.

Halacha (Jewish law) permits one to travel on the Sabbath in a *heter*, a life-or-death situation, "but it was only an emergency to go to the hospital, not to get back," says Rossio. In Bethesda, he either slept on a cot in his office or walked the 10 miles back home. Thankfully, he is an experienced marathon runner, so the trek wasn't that taxing.

When he moved back to Cleveland last year, Rossio didn't want to have to worry about having to work on Shabbat, his day for spending time with family and studying Torah. So he looked for opportunities in private practice where he could make use of his plastic surgery expertise and set his own schedule.

He found the ideal match with Advanced Laser Clinics, a franchise that specializes in hair removal and other non-invasive cosmetic techniques. Now, instead of the demands of reporting to a hospital for grueling seven-hour surgeries, Rossio performs shorter aesthetic treatments in his plush Beachwood office. And he can count on his pager remaining silent when attending Shabbat services at Young Israel with his wife Rivka and their three children.

The procedures he now performs are a lot less risky than preserving limbs. "Today, the worst thing that could happen during treatment is a bad rash," says Rossio.

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