

A *Class* OF HIS OWN

As the only exclusive pediatric ear reconstructive surgeon specializing in microtia in the United States, **Arturo Bonilla, M.D.**, continues to follow his destiny to help children hear and live fulfilling lives.

By: JODY JOSEPH MARMEL | Photography: ALEXANDER ALEMAN

“WHEN ONE CHILD SAID THAT he could hear the birds chirp for the first time in his life, I KNEW I WAS HOOKED.”



rowing up in San Antonio, Dr. Arturo Bonilla graduated from Central Catholic High School, and like his four siblings, he graduated from St. Mary's University. His initial plan was to deliver babies and work with his father, who is an OB/GYN. Once he entered medical

school at UT Medical School at Houston, Bonilla realized that he wanted to specialize in some sort of pediatric surgery. At the time, his older brother was in the process of beginning his pediatric ENT training at Harvard's Boston Children's Hospital.

During medical school, Bonilla's favorite rotation was pediatrics and ENT. He decided he would follow in his brother's footsteps as a pediatric otolaryngologist. Following medical school, Bonilla completed two years of general surgery residency, and that is where he met his wife of 22 years.

“We moved quite a bit from there,” he explains. “We moved to New York, where I completed three more years of otolaryngology-head and neck surgery residency. Following this, we moved to Pittsburgh for an additional two years for a pediatric otolaryngology-head and neck surgery research and clinical fellowship at the Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh under the world-renowned Dr. Charles Bluestone. Our focus was in pediatric ear surgery of all kinds. This is where I first operated on a child born without an ear (microtia). When one child said that he could hear the birds chirp for the first time in his life, I knew I was hooked.”

Thus started Bonilla's destiny: to help children hear and live a fulfilling life. He founded the Micro-

tia-Congenital Ear Deformity Institute in 1996 - the year they moved back home to San Antonio from Pittsburgh. At the time, there were already 79 children in his new practice who needed ear surgery. These children were born without ears and had severe hearing loss. There was no surgeon specializing in this type of practice.

Within a few years, the following had grown to several hundred patients, which made it one of the largest practices in the United States. The practice continued to grow to more than 2,000 active patients and several thousand others who were in the process of coming for a first visit.

Talking with Bonilla, it is quite obvious that he is a passionate and caring physician. Bonilla wants to ensure that his patients and their families get the necessary help and support to overcome their insecurities, fears and doubts.

“I enjoy helping in any way I can prior to surgery,” he says. “These children are so much fun to care for. They are highly intelligent, respectful and incredibly full of energy. We are always smiling in the office because each child brings a different perspective to this world. Since I only specialize in pediatric microtia surgery, my whole day revolves around these patients in one way or another. And I always make sure that the parents have access to my cell phone after hours. I know how important that is for all my patients.”

While there are surgeons who specialize in pediatric and adult plastic surgery in different parts of the country, there is no one else whose practice is exclusively dedicated to pediatric microtia. Bo-



bonilla does not perform other surgeries that plastic surgeons perform such as cleft palate surgery and other cosmetic surgeries. "This is the difference for most parents who are looking for a surgeon that performs a lot of the same type of pediatric ear surgery day in and day out."

As Bonilla is an exclusive surgeon on both a national and an international level, his skills and vast knowledge of the field are highly sought-after by many parents whose children need a highly trained and experienced specialist in microtia. And once they find Bonilla, their gratitude is never ending, and the children treated are Bonilla's reward.

The combination of Bonilla's extensive experience in the head and neck regions and his subspecialty in dealing only with children has put this stellar physician in a class of his own. The saying, "you will never see an adult patient in my office," holds true for Bonilla.

He explains microtia: There are different classifications, from grade I, which is a small ear with minor structures missing, to anotia, which is a total lack of an ear. The vast majority of these patients lack an ear canal and thus, suffer from severe hearing loss in that ear.

This ear deformity occurs in every 6,000 to 12,000 births. "Because my practice is dedicated 100 percent to this particular ear deformity, I usually see about 10 to 15 children every time I am in the office. Most parents are shocked that there are so many little patients in the office - all without ears. Although no one wishes this on any other family, it is somewhat comforting to them that they are not the only ones who have a child affected by this. Many of the families meet in the waiting room and become lifelong friends."

There are several options for ear reconstruction. Because the normal ear is made out of cartilage, there is nothing more natural than using our own living tissues. Thus, the cartilage surgical tech-

nique is the most common technique in the world. The cartilage is obtained using small pieces of the child's own rib. These small pieces of cartilage are carved and sculpted into the shape of an ear. The incision is very small and well hidden. Since the cartilage belongs to the child, it will have its own circulation and therefore, grow with the child. The chances of rejection are essentially zero. It lasts a lifetime, and the skin color is more natural than any other technique.

There are also several options to correct the hearing. Since the vast majority of these children don't have an ear canal, the ideal option would be to have the ear canal opened with a specialized drill. This hearing correction surgery is a highly specialized surgery, and there are very few surgeons in the country who have the volume of experience in this field. San Antonio is very lucky to have well-trained neurologists capable of caring for these children.

Because the facial nerve is located near the area where the ear canal is supposed to go, there is always a risk of damage (albeit a small one). In some cases, the patient is not a candidate to have this ear canal opening option. Other options include a small implant that is placed on the skull behind the new ear. This implant is connected to the outside world with a separate screw (abutment) connected to a hearing processor. The newer hearing implants are actually magnets, so there is no longer a connection needed through the scalp. This decreases the chance of infections.

The exact cause of microtia is unknown. There are certain syndromes that are associated with microtia and atresia, but one of the leading theories is that the circulation was interrupted during development of the ear. As a result, the ear began to grow, but stopped at a certain point. Few people know this, but Paul Stanley, the lead guitarist for the rock band, Kiss, was born without an ear. "He

is an incredible example of a person who did not let his microtia/atresia interfere with his dream of becoming a world-famous rock star," Bonilla says.

Due to Bonilla's specialized skills, experience and knowledge, his practice has also become known as the International Center for Ear Reconstruction. "We have operated on children throughout the United States, Mexico and most countries in South America," he says. "Ecuador happens to be the country with one of the largest volumes of children with microtia in the world. We actually had the president of Panama sign off and send a child to have his ear reconstructed. We have also treated children from Europe and operated on children as far away as Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Again, every child has a story."

The Microtia-Congenital Ear Deformity Institute's goals are extensive. One of the most important ones has always been to educate families about the management of this condition. Special picnics for children with microtia are held throughout the country by Ear Community to help educate families about this condition. This is also a great opportunity for families to meet each other. And there is a yearly conference held in Los Angeles where Bonilla speaks to more than 100 families about the option of ear reconstruction utilizing the cartilage technique.

"Interestingly, I usually see patients in the hotel lobby during all of my trips, whether it is in Los Angeles while we are visiting Disney or in Boston while visiting my oldest son in college." Bonilla's trip to the Northeast typically draws children from Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, Connecticut, New York, Maine and other nearby states.

Bonilla's popularity is apparent for many reasons. Clinical Office Manager Shelly Hernandez explains this quite well. "Working with our microtia patients has been a life experience for me that has made me so appreciative of this job. I go to work,



and I play a part in changing a child's life. Our patients are so grateful for us and for what we see as our everyday job, but I take pride and passion in helping these parents and kids out in whatever way I can.

"My life is positively affected because every one of these patients is so in love with Dr. Bonilla. We have heard him referenced by numerous patients as their 'hero,' and as a parent myself, I know exactly what they mean. This is one of the many rea-

had a child from South America that flew into Florida with his father, and once there, they were told that they would not be able to have the surgery because of the lack of funds. An international kids' fund called to see if we would be able to take care of him. They were eating out of canned goods until they could get help.

"We had the hospital, anesthesiologist, airfare and lodging arranged and were able to help him. He now has a new ear and is exploding with confi-

ies. We will be able to provide support for surgery, hearing aids, travel and accommodations."

Bonilla has taken the extra steps in order to give him the necessary skills to run this nonprofit. He is halfway into his MBA at Babson College in Massachusetts, and he travels to Boston every six weeks to complete his master's degree. US News & World Report has ranked Babson College the No. 1 entrepreneurship MBA in the United States for the last 20 years, leading Stanford, MIT and Harvard.

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sons why I am truly grateful to be a part of this process that our patients experience."

April Devine, clinical office manager, shares Hernandez's sentiments. "It is a joy watching these kids transform over such a short period of time. They are so strong and so brave. The entire process truly changes their confidence and outlook on life. I am very blessed to be a part of their journey."

Between the two office managers and Erika Puente, clinical coordinator of the Microtia-Congenital Ear Deformity Institute, they manage to do it "all." They coordinate hotel stays for patients (and they have discounts at the hotel for all of their patients), they schedule office visits, they travel to meetings and they provide billing services and all other patient support, making the environment a welcoming one for all children and parents who walk through the front door.

The most fulfilling aspect in this practice is to see how quickly there is a total transformation in the confidence and self-esteem of these children. "Each child has a different story," Bonilla says. "I

dence in his native country. We could recall a great story in every single child that has had his or her ear reconstructed."

After 18 years in practice, Bonilla continually devotes his life to these children who were born without ears and helps jump-start their lives with these surgeries. "It is a truly gratifying experience, and it is very humbling that these parents are putting their children's lives in our hands," Bonilla says. "Because there are so many families who are reaching out for help around the world, but don't have the financial ability to come to the United States, we are in the process of starting a nonprofit foundation dedicated exclusively to helping these children with ear deformities."

Bonilla is in the process of obtaining a 501(c)(3) status, and they are expecting to launch the nonprofit by the first or second quarter of 2014. Several members of the business community and parents of children born with microtia will be part of the board. "Our goal is to be able to support children who don't have the means to afford these surger-

Once again, Bonilla's commitment to these children is apparent every step of the way in his personal and professional journey. "This is a very exciting venture," he says. "We will be able to support so many more children who don't have the financial means to make it here."

Bonilla is one-of-a-kind in his exclusivity in his field, and he also is a unique physician and advocate for all of his patients, future patients and their families. The world is brighter because of professionals like him, and every child is blessed to have the fortunate care of this magnanimous medical doctor and surgeon who makes a difference - for the rest of their lives.

Arturo Bonilla, M.D., is the founder and director of the Microtia-Congenital Ear Deformity Institute, located at 9502 Huebner Road, Ste. 301, in San Antonio, Texas. For more information, call 210-477-EARS (3277) or visit www.microtia.net.