

Greek-American Surgeon Florakis Gives the Priceless Gift of Eyesight

Continued from page 1

tors to let him do projects and he eventually was working in the lab. Dr. Balazs, a Hungarian-American doctor with whom Florakis worked for four summers became his research mentor. And now he is a mentor as well, with a number of medical students and fellows who work with him on various clinical projects for improving surgical procedures.

When the cornea is damaged, they replace it with one from a recently-deceased donor with no known diseases or other factors that may have an adverse effect on the recipient. Traditionally, the full cornea was required but there is a new procedure where surgeons only replace part of the cornea's thickness. Since 2006, doctors can tunnel into it and take out the bad layers and replace it with some new tissue. Rehabilitation takes three months, as opposed to an entire year under the old method. Florakis has done over 2000 full transplants and 350 partial ones.

The long-term prognosis for such a new procedure is unknown, but the tissue is half as likely to be rejected. He is also conducting research, trying making better predictions prior to surgery as to which patients will have better outcomes and which donor parameters can help determine which patients will do better.

The human element in his practice also supplies memorable moments. Florakis once performed a corneal transplant for a woman who had not been able to see in 15 years. After the surgery, she looked at her husband and said "boy, you are still so handsome." Then she looked in the mirror and said, "boy, did I get fat," – displaying a sense of humor that was probably quite helpful to the healing process.

Florakis is excited about new developments in his field. Currently, even with partial transplants, the cells come from other people. The cells that go bad in a cornea are called endothelial cells. Everyone is born with a certain number of them



Dr. George Florakis is a surgeon Clinical Professor of Ophthalmology at Columbia University Medical Center.

and does not grow new ones. As folks age, cells are lost, at differing rates. They are important because they pump out the cornea's fluid. When they don't pump sufficiently, the cornea swells and becomes cloudy.

Florakis hopes that in the future he will be able to remove a person's endothelial cells and put them onto a plate and make more grow. The cells would be re-injected into the eye, rendering a transplant unnecessary. The complication that must be resolved is to turn off the growing process to avoid a cancer-like situation. Developing a substrate to put the new cells on so they attach to the cornea is 5-10 years away, Florakis surmises.

The big development on the horizon, however – with profound implications for medicine overall – is gene therapy, especially for inherited conditions

that include a number of cornea problems. Florakis explained that once scientists figure out which genes cause the problem, the pertinent enzyme or protein could be targeted before someone develops the disease.

It is very satisfying to provide sight to people, but Florakis said it is important to remain humble. Every doctor and surgeon has to maintain that because "what happens with those people you can't make see? Then you are humbled. It's like flying an airliner. You can fly back and forth across the country 100 times but all you need is one crash and it's devastating," he said.

On the one hand, Florakis said physicians are trained and to be able to deal with that "on the other hand if it doesn't get to you, even if you are a seasoned physician, then you shouldn't be a physician. It still gets to me. If you are going to be a compassionate person at any level you have to realize you are dealing with humans, whether you are dealing with their kidneys, their hearts, or their eyes, and if things are going downhill with them, if you lose that compassion you shouldn't be a physician, but you have to be able [to be cool] to do your job," in the operating room.

And that is hard, Florakis acknowledged, especially for young physicians. He remembers his early years because an ophthalmologist has to go through general medicine first. "When you are in medicine, people will die. When you see a patient who has died that you have worked on for weeks and weeks," it is painful. "It's not

your fault, it may have been his time, but still you have been doing your best. Your heart drops." He recently had to sit with a patient and explain that they really tried all they could. "It's just heartbreaking."

One of the standout qualities of the very best physicians is bedside manner, the importance of communicating, and of conveying hope as well as compassion when the news is not good. He said that comes from his mother. "She is a very compassionate and religious woman. She always taught me to be humble and think about and care about the other person and just do what's right. That's my mom," he said.

From his dad, Florakis inherited the drive to work hard and strive to be the best. "My father bounces back from everything and I think I got that from him too." He said he must give him credit "for a guy who came here and didn't speak English, like many immigrants, he had three restaurants, he became an officer at Columbia University. They named a lab after him with a huge retirement party. He was an insurance and real estate broker – he's done it all."

GROWING UP GREEK

Florakis' childhood was a typical Greek-American experience. He spoke Greek at home and learned English in public school. Florakis played in the Archdiocese's GOYA basketball league and was on his high school swim team. He was also active at the church: as an altar boy, in the choir, and in Sunday School and Greek School. He cherishes memories of his first trip to Greece when he was 10 years old. Those trips were vital to the strong Hellenic identity and pride he developed.

His wife Cathy's father is from the island of Nisyros and her mother is from Kastoria. They both take pride in their talented children. Their 18 year-old son James is enrolled in Hellenic Studies at Fordham and excels at Ancient Greek. The 16 year-old Eleni plays flute and piano and has an affinity for math and science. Christina just turned 15 and she plays cello and French horn, in addition to being track and field athlete. She loves science as well. Florakis said she is now reading original research articles that even he has difficulty under-

standing.

The story of Florakis' father Dimitrios has some twists that are interesting enough that a general audience would enjoy it, but he wanted to be certain his grandchildren know it, so wrote about it and online published it himself as The Dream. Dimitrios was born in Athens

decided sail over himself and jump ship.

His uncle owned a restaurant, and Dimitrios balked at becoming a dishwasher. He stuck to his studies and went to a technical school. After trying his hand at his own restaurant, he found work as a lab technician for Columbia University – a job



Dr. Florakis specializes in cornea transplants. His patients benefit from his skill, dedication, and medical progress.

with roots in Ioannina. He came to the United States in 1949, the same year his wife Eleni arrived. He is now working on her story.

Dimitrios' father died during the German occupation and his mother took his family back to Ioannina, where food was available. He remembers the Greeks fighting the Germans and then the Greeks fighting the Greeks. Things were still bad when the family returned to Athens, so decisions had to be made. By then he was 16 years old. Watching a lot of Hollywood movies, he became fascinated with America and wanted to go there. When the immigration application his aunt in Yonkers submitted was delayed, he to

on the night shift that nobody wanted. He worked his way up to becoming director of Columbia's cyclotron, its atomic accelerator in Westchester. After being transferred to the Brookhaven National Labs he went back to Columbia's physics department. He is the classic Greek go-getter.

Florakis' patients benefit from a number of inherited skills. He told TNH "this morning I said in the operating room, 'all I do is spend half my time putting stitches into people's corneas and half my time taking them out. My mother was a seamstress,'" proving great things flow from humble sources.

QUESTION OF THE WEEK

Vote on our website!

You have the chance to express your opinion on our website on an important question in the news. The results will be published in our printed edition next week along with the question for that week.

The question this week is: Do you believe new Greek PM Lucas Papademos should be given more time than only until February to help Greece get on track before new elections?

- Yes
 No
 Maybe

The results for last week's question: Are politicians' private lives important to you when deciding for whom to vote?

65% voted "Yes"
23% voted "No"
12% voted "Maybe"

Please vote at: www.thenationalherald.com

St. Demetrios of Jamaica Welcomes You To Our Annual

**2012
New Year's Eve
Dance**

Featuring the music of
Spasta Entertainment

Saturday, December 31, 2011

St. Demetrios Hall, 84-35 152nd Street, Jamaica, NY 11432

Doors open at 9:00pm

Dinner served at 10:00pm

- ❖ Premium Open Bar
- ❖ Butler-Passed Hors D'oeuvres \$80/per guest
- ❖ Buffet-Style Culinary Stations \$30/Under 18 years old
- ❖ Dessert & Coffee
- ❖ Vasilopita for Every Table
- ❖ White Glove Waiter Service
- ❖ New Year's Eve Party Favors

RSVP: Church Office: (718) 291-2420
Michael Papagianopoulos: (917) 617-9259
Margo Pangalos: (718) 380-4309
Georgeta Spelios: StDemetriosNYE@gmail.com

ARCHDIOCESE OF THE HOLY TRINITY

319 East 74th St., NYC, NY • 10021 (212) 288-3215
www.thecathedralnyc.org

*“Christ is born, glorify Him
Christ on Earth, let us be lifted up
let the entire Earth glorify Him”*

We invite the faithful to participate
in the Christmas Eve,
Christmas Day and New Year's Day Services.

Saturday, December 24, 2011
Christmas Eve
7:00 pm – Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom
His Eminence Archbishop Demetrios of America presiding.
Our Cathedral Choir invites you
to join a special program of Christmas Carols after the Liturgy.

Sunday, December 25, 2011
Holy Nativity/Christmas Day
9:00 am – Divine Liturgy of St. Basil the Great

Sunday, January 1, 2012
St. Basil Feast Day
9:00 am – Orthros & Hierarchical Divine Liturgy
with His Eminence Archbishop Demetrios of America presiding.
A St. Basil Day Reception and Vasilopeta
cutting to follow in the Cathedral Center.

The parishioners of Holy Trinity Cathedral
wish the Greek-American community
a New Year filled with health, peace, prosperity and faith.

**Merry Christmas
and a Blessed New Year**