



## **Finding Their Voice Dr. Mazaheri's Skills Have Helped Generations**

Mary Beth Schweigert

David Irvin picked up a pistol. He would kill himself, he decided. But he would wait until after graduation. Irvin, who grew up in Altoona [PA], was born with a cleft palate and lip. Surgery corrected his appearance, but his speech remained unclear. Only one playmate understood what Irvin said. Other kids made fun of him. He never had a date. "It was hell on earth," Irvin says matter-of-factly.

Just before graduation, Irvin won a football scholarship to Franklin and Marshall College. His suicide plans changed, but his pain persisted. After college, Irvin met Dr. Mohammad Mazaheri. And for the first time, he found his voice. "I give him all the credit in the world for making it possible for me to talk," says Irvin, now 85, of Akron [OH]. "He's hard to beat."

Mazaheri, a 76-year-old Iranian immigrant, recently marked 50 years at the Lancaster Cleft Palate Clinic. Affectionately called "Dr. Maz" or "Mo," he makes speech-aid appliances for cleft patients and facial prosthetics for cancer and accident victims. And, using his own money, Mazaheri travels the world, operating on cleft patients and teaching doctors how to treat them.

Known for his boundless energy and strong personality, Mazaheri passed retirement age long ago. Clinic director Dr. Ross "Rusty" Long Jr. says his rare skills aren't easily replaceable. "It's hard to imagine the clinic functioning without him there," Long says. Mazaheri, who lives with his wife, Naheed, in Lancaster, says he won't consider retirement until a replacement is found. "You become so attached to the place," he says. "Somebody has to do this."

One of six children, Mazaheri grew up on a produce farm outside Tehran. After graduating first in his class from the University of Tehran College of Medicine and Dentistry, he came to the United States for further medical training. Mazaheri's father sold nearly everything he had to pay for his son's education at the University of Pennsylvania. When he wasn't in class, Mazaheri sold orange juice and ice cream in Philadelphia.

Dr. H.K. Cooper, founder of the Lancaster Cleft Palate Clinic, spoke at the University of Pennsylvania, piquing Mazaheri's interest in prosthodontics, a branch of dentistry focused on replacing missing teeth. In 1952, Mazaheri interned at Cooper's clinic. And he never left.



Currently, he serves as chief of medical/dental services at the nonprofit clinic, which treats patients from all over the world. Such specialized clinics usually exist only in larger cities. In Pennsylvania, only Pittsburgh and Philadelphia offer similar services. "Lancaster is very lucky to have this place," Mazaheri says. "It's a highly specialized field. People don't mind traveling quite a distance to receive the needed care."

Cleft palate is the third most common birth defect, affecting one in 700 US babies. The palate, or roof of the mouth, does not fuse together properly, leaving a hole or split in the palate, and sometimes the lip. Cleft patients require specialized care into their teens. Clefts can be surgically repaired in infancy, but children may have trouble eating, speaking and hearing. Many need speech therapy, braces, tooth implants or dental appliances.

"You see them grow up," Mazaheri says. "You develop more than a patient-doctor relationship. You become part of the family." Care is expensive, and many patients can't afford to pay. Similarly, trained physicians, Mazaheri points out, can make a much better living doing liposuctions.

Long, grandson of clinic founder Cooper, says Mazaheri's dedication to the clinic has fueled some passionate debates. "He can be strongly opinionated to the point that it becomes frustrating to argue with him," Long says, with an affectionate chuckle. "But when you cut through it all, he's got a heart of gold. He cares about his patients." Mazaheri still works with cleft patients, but he specializes in creating natural-looking facial prosthetics for cancer, accident or burn victims. "There are relatively few individuals like him in the country to take care of that group of patients," Long says. "He's kind of the buck-stops-here person."

Cynthia Handel of Willow Street was born blind. Nearly 35 years later, she developed cancer due to childhood radiation treatments. Radical surgery to remove the cancer cost her an eye, part of her palate and some facial bones. In 1989, Mazaheri crafted prosthetic eyes and a facial prosthesis for Handel. "He knows so much and can do so much for the people who come to the clinic," Handel says. "I just admire him and think he's a great doctor, a great person."

Plaques, certificates, and photographs cover a wall in Mazaheri's office from floor to ceiling. "I've just, you know, been a few places," he says. Mazaheri has written 100 articles, presented 300 academic papers and won countless awards. He plays golf three times a week, even in the winter. Mazaheri has four children, two stepchildren and 10 grandchildren. He paid for all of his siblings to come live in America. He travels all over the world, performing surgery on cleft patients and training local doctors.



In many countries, including Iran, children with clefts are shunned. They often grow up in orphanages. Mazaheri started the Happy Face Foundation, which provides free treatment for Iranian children with cleft palates. Dr. David C. Leber, a Harrisburg plastic surgeon and clinic volunteer, recently traveled to Iran with Mazaheri. "He's really done a lot to support his home country, out of his own pocket," Leber says. "He's just totally dedicated to taking care of these kids. "When the younger doctors were ready to take a nap, Leber recalls, Mazaheri met with Iran's Minister of Finance. "He's quite a character," he says. "He will walk up to anyone and talk to them. Every place he goes, he knows everybody."

Mazaheri now treats the children of former patients. Leah Davis, who saw Mazaheri for treatment of her cleft palate, says "Dr. Maz" scared her as a child. In 2001, Davis's second son Noah was born with a cleft palate and lip. Mazaheri guides his care, including speech therapy. A quarter century later, Mazaheri looks the same, Davis says, but he has softened with age. "He just has a strong personality, which I appreciate now as an adult," says Davis, of Lancaster. "He's a good man. He's very bright." Today, Davis volunteers at the clinic, and 2 ½-year old Noah speaks in full sentences. "He's not going to have the challenges I had, which makes me feel really good," Davis says.

David Irvin, once a teenager set on suicide, became a husband, father, and businessman. After college, he unloaded freight at Armstrong. But after Mazaheri designed an oral appliance that allowed him to speak, Irvin climbed the company ladder. He retired 41 years later, as assistant controller of the floor plant. He still sees Mazaheri for regular appointments. "I tell him every time I see him to be sure and stay healthy," Irvin says. "I owe him everything."

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Ed. Note: This article was reprinted by permission of the Lancaster, Pennsylvania *Lancaster Era* newspaper. It appeared in the newspaper's March 19, 2004 magazine section. Dr. Mazaheri is a Charter Fellow of the American College of Prosthodontists. He was given the College's first President's Award at the Annual Session in Williamsburg, VA in 1986. He was recognized for originating, establishing, and managing the commercial exhibits for the College. As was stated in the citation given him, "He has taken a concept and turned it into a valuable part of the annual session, which is of great benefit to the members. He has improved the esteem of our specialty by the standard he has set in our dealings with all dental manufacturers. He has substantially increased the worth of the College with his wise guidance of the financial aspects of this project. His counsel and advice have been of great value to the Executive Council." In addition, Dr. Mazaheri is a member and fellow of many other prestigious dental and prosthodontic organizations. The *ProsStars Newsletter* takes special pleasure in honoring Dr. Mazaheri once again with the reprint of this article. NDW