

Sharing the Art of Surgery: *A Gift of Transformation*

Written by: **Sara Mullins**

Photography by **Dr. Robert Carpenter and Staff**

For the past nine years, Dr. Robert Carpenter, a plastic surgeon in Cumberland, Maryland, has pursued a passion for medical missions in the Philippines. He works as part of a team that treats medically underserved people living in the rugged mountains of Ifugao Province, located in the northern island of Luzon, where the highest peaks rise to 13,000 feet. Two thousand years ago, the ancestors of the Ifugao, or “mountain people,” carved rice terraces into mountainsides. Created without any machinery, the rice terraces follow the contours of the mountains and are widely known as the “Eighth Natural Wonder of the World.” Like other tribes in the region, the Ifugao were once bellicose headhunters who resisted colonization and practiced a polytheistic religion involving more than 1,200 gods. Today, the Ifugao are a peaceful people known for their skills in woodcarving, basketry and fabrics, and most have converted to Christianity. Poverty is widespread and persistent in the Ifugao Province.

“There is a desperate need for medical care in this isolated area,” says Dr. Carpenter. “It’s a four to six hour walk to the nearest road, from which they can get a ride to the hospital.” The medical team travels to the regional hospital in Ifugao Province every year in late January or early February. After a long drive winding through the mountains in a bus loaded with luggage and all necessary supplies, they receive a warm welcome from their Filipino and other colleagues from overseas when they finally reach their destination. For up to three weeks, they work 12 to 14-hour days to perform patient evaluations, surgical repair and follow-up care. They also participate in opportunities to teach surgeons and residents. After completing each mission, the team donates any surgical and dental instruments, plus durable equipment, to the hospital.





Above and right:
Rice terraces, carved two thousand years ago into the mountainside, were created without any machinery.

Below: The Ibulao River is surrounded by majestic mountains, where the highest peaks reach up to 13,000 feet.



Dr. Carpenter's focus is the surgical repair of cleft lip and palate deformities that occur with greater frequency among people of Asian descent than other populations. Many of his patients have waited years for surgery usually performed by 10 weeks of age in the United States. Successful treatment is a team effort requiring the skills of a plastic surgeon, ENT (ears, nose and throat) physician, nurse, audiologist, oral surgeon, speech therapist, social worker and dentist.

In 2006, Dr. Romulo Villanueva of Cumberland invited Dr. Carpenter to perform cleft lip repair as part of a mission team traveling to the Philippines, Dr.





Top photo: Usually two operating beds are set up in each Operating Room — a local way to double the operating capacity for the mission.

Bottom left: Michelle (before surgery) with Katie Martin, daughter of Anesthesiologist, Dr. Joe Martin.
Bottom right: Michelle (one year after surgery) with Dr. Carpenter’s daughter, Heather.

Carpenter had just retired after 18 years with the Army Reserves Medical Corps as a general and trauma surgeon, and then as a reconstructive plastic surgeon. The following year, he accepted an invitation to work in Ifugao from Dr. Conrad Zapanta, a classmate of Dr. Villanueva. Years later, in gratitude to his mentor, Dr. Carpenter wrote a book entitled, “Seven Lessons Conrad Taught Me: A Story in Pictures.”

“I’ve been enthralled since the first mission,” he says. “There is an artistic aspect of changing the face and the realization of how life-altering that is.”

Dr. Carpenter’s mission work builds on a long-term interest in art and medicine. During high school, he developed an interest in art that continued at the College of William and Mary, where he created a comic strip for the college newspaper. He took classes in sculpture, pottery and medical



of the Cumberland Cleft Clinic, a nonprofit that provided services for children with cleft lip and palate deformities, regardless of their ability to pay. His work in the Philippines follows on his work in Cumberland. He has worked with Smile Train, Compassion in Action and many other service organizations that support overseas medical missions.



On the web site of his practice, Allegany Plastic Surgery, Dr. Carpenter has posted a video describing the transformational effect of plastic surgery on a young woman named Aina, who was born with severe, disfiguring facial birth defects that she tried to hide with a

illustration while majoring in biology. “I’ve always been fascinated by the human body and how it moves,” he said. “I was always trending toward medicine and surgery. I was good with my hands so I felt like I was a natural fit for my chosen profession.”

After earning his M.D. at the University of Virginia School of Medicine, he completed a general surgery residency at the University of Rochester Medical School and a residency in plastic surgery at the Johns Hopkins Medical Institution. In 1995, he and his wife Judy were expecting their fifth child and were ready to find a home where they could establish stable roots for their family. They chose Cumberland after learning that it was a medically underserved area with a trauma center in need of a plastic surgeon. “It helped that we love outdoor stuff and skiing, and it wasn’t far from Baltimore,” he says.

In 2004, Dr. Carpenter worked with the Crippled Children’s League and the Allegany County Health Department to establish and serve as medical director



Top photo: Bulul – carved “rice god” figures used to guard rice crops. The Ifugao are particularly noted for their skill in carving bulul.

Above: Ifugao native women shop owners.

towel. She left school at age 14 because she could no longer tolerate teasing from her classmates. After several futile attempts to receive care, she arrived at Dr. Carpenter’s clinic and was successfully treated. In the doctor’s words, “her life turned around.” Her family held a celebration for her, and she resumed her studies.

“I’ve had the privilege of bringing my family members with me in previous years,” he says. Their presence is a real blessing to me, for them to see what I do and participate in this mission of serving people,” he says. “I get more out of it than I give. It’s the purest form of medicine.”

The Ifugao are a proud people who take pleasure in sharing their heritage by “adopting” those they deem worthy. After four years with the mission, Dr. Carpenter was adopted as a “Son of Ifugao,” and given the name “Wigan.” Wigan is a prominent figure in Ifugao mythology, a “first man” figure much like the Biblical Adam.

“I feel honored to have it,” he says. “Wigan is considered the patron saint of healing.” To express their gratitude, the Ifugao have honored him with an assortment of hand-crafted gifts — a carved wood statue of a warrior, a traditional Ifugao outfit consisting of a woven shawl and loin cloth, a headdress with feathers, a large woven backpack, a “bola” knife with holder, and an impressive spear* that had to be cut into pieces for transport back to the U.S.

Dr. Carpenter looks forward to the next mission trip, with a planned departure of January 21, 2016.

“In the United States, we are abundantly blessed,” he says. “The least of us have the basics. Sharing that abundance is important. There are a lot of people in need. Filling that need is an important part of life. I want to use my skill set to fulfill my needs and desires while meeting the needs of others. It’s mutually edifying. There is no greater sense of happiness. It’s been a blessing to me that just a few hours of my life can make such a profound difference in the life of someone else.”

**The spear was cut into individual pieces to be able to fit in a suitcase to go through customs. After it arrived back in Cumberland, Dr. Carpenter turned it over to Lance Bell (one of the owners/editors of Mountain Discoveries) for careful reassembly. As a woodcarver and craftsman, Lance was able to reassemble the 6-foot spear.*

For more information and to help support the Ifugao missions, contact Dr. Robert Carpenter at ifugaomedicalmission@gmail.com.



Top: Dr. Conrad Zapanta and Dr. Rob Carpenter, preparing for surgery during the mission.

Middle left: Aina before her surgery.

Middle right: Aina (after surgery) with Allison Hannaway.

Above left: Steven Ivan Molingong before surgery.

Above right: Steven with Dr. Carpenter, a few years after surgery.



Above: Dr. Carpenter wears the regalia given him by the Ifugao people to express their gratitude and friendship. He is holding the reassembled 100 year old spear. Also shown are the hand made bolo knife and wood carving of an Ifugao warrior.



Top photo: A young Ifugao girl dances in a traditional woven skirt.

Bottom photo: A young drummer tribesman in woven Ifugao attire with loincloth, headdress, and shawl.