



#### HUMANITARIAN AWARD

## Mel "Yogi" Bert, MD, FACS Class of 1967

**As a proud graduate of SUNY Upstate Medical Center in 1967, Mel "Yogi" Bert, MD, FACS** was off to his internship at San Francisco General Hospital. It was a wonderful and exciting time in US history, "Days of Aquarius." His internship in San Francisco was enlightening and exhilarating.

Then came the dark ages in the form of the Viet Nam police action. Two years were taken from him by the US Air Force for no apparent reason. Would you believe a couple of guys spit on his uniform in San Francisco!!!!

In 1970, he was off to New York City and the New York Eye & Ear Infirmary. By 1973 combining both his training at Upstate and his specialty training at NYE & E, he was off again to San Francisco to begin his practice of Ophthalmology from scratch. He set several goals for himself:

1. Teaching: Give back to medical students and residents what had been given to him. His ultimate goal was to become full clinical professor at UCSF which he achieved in 1993.

2. Chief Department of Ophthalmology: In 1986 he was appointed the youngest chief of ophthalmology in San Francisco at The Marshall Hale Memorial Hospital.

3. Help tens of thousands and even millions of people to see around the world. He was approached to raise monies for a fledgling project in Tibet. He was approached because he was a full professor and because he was the "suit" in a successful rock and roll production company from San Francisco. A colleague, Dr. Marc Lieberman thought that Dr. Bert would be able to raise money from within the industry. Seed money was raised and the Tibet Vision Project had its beginning in 1995.

The Tibet Vision Project has become an important part of who he is today. It is now seventeen years later. He has been taken to Tibet, Nepal, and places in China by the proj-

ect. Why Tibet? With the highest incidence of treatable cataracts in the world Tibet was calling for help. Because of the high altitude and the lack of sunglasses, and poor use of hats, people develop cataracts at a very young age. Sometimes they go blind in their forties.

For the past seventeen years, Dr. Bert has been working to change that. He and his colleague Dr. Marc Lieberman are the mainstays of the Tibet Vision Project ([www.tibetvision-project.org](http://www.tibetvision-project.org)). They were troubled by the scope of vision problems affecting the people of Tibet. They decided that they would spend 30 days on their initial trip together in Tibet. Dr. Lieberman told him that he was the only full professor he could spend a full month with (ha! ha!). The trip was life and mind altering. Dr. Bert was impressed at the huge impact a single physician could have on tens of thousands of people. He immediately changed the way in which the Tibetan surgeons operated. That alone improved the outcome by 60%. Their previous surgical procedures were 40-50 years old and fraught with many complications. With the improvement the surgeons actually wanted to operate more often since they were now more successful. During the ensuing years, the 15 - 20 surgeons trained, did thousands of cataract operations. Even when we are not there, these surgeons continue to operate with our support.

Going to the outlying small towns to set up eye camps is an all encompassing trial. First of all there are times when we have no electricity. We have a small generator which then is used to give light to the microscopes. All of the other instrumentation is mechanical. This was an important part of the technique. Here in the US, 50% of the cataract extraction is automated and done by machines. We couldn't do that in Tibet. Our trips to these towns take us over river beds and very rough "roads." We use land cruisers since they are capable of off road travel. The Tibetans



in these areas look at us as aliens since most of them have never seen Caucasians. Some even come and rub my stomach believing that I might be a Buddha (I have a belly!). The children follow us all over. The conditions are primitive. I used to consider camping out as staying in a Holiday Inn with the windows open. Not anymore!!!!

I remember one patient who had surgery for cataracts the day before. On the subsequent day, I removed his patches and all he did was stare at his hand. I asked our translator to find out what was wrong with his hand. He responded that there was nothing wrong with his hand. He had not seen it in seven years!!!

A documentary, *Visioning Tibet*, was made about our Project and subsequently shown many times on PBS. This film illustrated the heart and soul of the Project. It won several awards around the world and I was very proud to share my work with everyone. This film was shown as part of my Weiskotten Lecture 2005 -2010 here at Upstate. I was very happy that it was so well received by the alumni.

The Project still has roadblocks in the form of the Chinese government. We along with all of the other 128 NGOs were expelled

from Tibet in 2009. Through a lot of perseverance, we have made many attempts to reestablish our position in Tibet. At the present time we are working with Sun Yat Sen Medical University in Guangzhou, China. The head of their ophthalmology department is very interested in our Project and has been very helpful. In fact, we are setting up a modified project which will allow our Tibetan surgeons to go to Guangzhou for 3 months of training alongside the Chinese residents and fellows.

The Chinese are amazed that we are willing to do all of this work without financial compensation. The longer I do this work, the more I feel like an ambassador for the USA. Governments also have a lot to learn.

Finally, one of the joyous moments of my life is soon to happen. My son, Benjamin B. Bert, MD (Upstate 2008) will be joining me in the practice of ophthalmology in San Francisco. We shall practice together as "The Bert Boys" for many years to come. Hopefully, he will perpetuate the above humanitarian endeavor and gain all that I have. ■

\*Bio submitted by Dr. Bert