

Eye surgeon helps Orange Park man save his sight

By SUSAN D. BRANDENBURG
My Clay Sun

Willie Wilson squared his shoulders, wiped the fog off of his thick glasses, cocked his ear for oncoming traffic, and marched resolutely across the street to the newly constructed Gulani Vision Institute on Gate Parkway.

Wilson was desperate. A part-time security officer for Mayo Clinic-St. Luke's Hospital in Jacksonville, Wilson's daily drive from his home in Orange Park had become terrifying. He was going blind and it was just a matter of time before the 52-year-old uninsured Air Force veteran would be jobless. Lasik surgery, he'd been told repeatedly, was not an option. No eye surgeon had been willing to touch him, but maybe this guy at Gulani Vision Institute would be different.



SUSAN D. BRANDENBURG/Special to My Clay Sun Left to right, Chander Gulani, Willie Wilson and Dr. Arun Gulani. Wilson, an Orange Park resident, recently underwent a double lens exchange surgery at Gulani's clinic.

"How could I resist Willie?" said ophthalmologist Arun Gulani. "I examined him. I knew I could help him. He needed lens exchange surgery in both eyes." Using the same new generation acrylic polymer lens implants that he uses with cataract patients, Gulani successfully performed the surgery three weeks later. Wilson was the first patient to benefit from Gulani's new non-profit foundation, which provides cost-free eye surgery to persons in need. The Gulani Vision Foundation was founded in memory of his mother, Veena, "who inspired me to help others," and in honor of his father, Chander, who was in Jacksonville visiting from Bombay, India, when Wilson became the first beneficiary. The foundation is a natural progression for the Southside eye surgeon who travels to international ophthalmology conferences monthly to teach his advanced LASIK techniques, often performing philanthropic eye surgery under primitive conditions in remote third world villages and jungles.

Former Chief of Cornea Service and Assistant Professor at the University of Florida School of Medicine, where he performed Florida's first artificial cornea transplant, Gulani now mentors aspiring eye surgeons from around the world who seek fellowships at his new Gulani Vision Institute on Gate Parkway. Inventor of most of the Bausch & Lomb surgical instruments utilized by LASIK surgeons worldwide, Gulani has also originated a new LASIK super-specialty called Corneoplastique that, this year, garnered him the International Gold Medal from the International Refractive and Lens Society. "Gulani is a pioneer," said Jacksonville optometrist Jay Gallaty. "Maybe 1 in 100,000 ophthalmologists have done what he's done. That's why he's my eye surgeon." Gallaty had undergone unsuccessful vision correction surgery (Radial Keratotomy-RK) in the early 1990s and for the past 12 years had sought corrective surgery for his distorted vision. "It took a dozen years to find the technology and the doctor who understood how to use the technology to offer a viable solution to the distortions of my cornea."

Describing Gulani as the "Bruce Lee" of eye surgery, Gallaty notes that, just as Lee learned all of the martial arts from the masters and applied them as needed, Gulani has learned from the masters all over the world and combined advanced technologies into Corneoplastique, literally "turning back the clock" for Gallaty with advanced LASIK Surgery in 2006. While most physicians eventually develop a cadre of devoted patients, Gulani is highly unusual in that he has developed a following of medical devotees who laud him. "It's not just about his skill. It's about his whole process. Dr. Gulani has a humanitarian heart and always goes the extra mile for my patients," said Flora Chen Poveda, an Orange Park eye doctor who regularly refers patients to Gulani. "If I had a family member in need of eye surgery, I'd send them to no one else." "I've never referred a patient to him that wasn't thrilled with the outcome," said Orange Park optometrist Gregory Hunter. "Gulani is probably the most interesting and innovative new doctor to come to this area in the 30 years I've been in practice. He does things people have never seen or heard of before. He's doing the future right now."

Recently, Orange Park eye doctor Kyle Abshire sent his patient, Iara Vangilder of Green Cove Springs, to Gulani. Vangilder, a native of Brazil, had a Pterygium in her left eye, an unsightly pinkish-yellow, triangular-shaped growth that is exacerbated by exposure to the sun and often plagues people in tropical climates. Although it is a condition that many eye surgeons avoid due to uncertainty of outcome, Gulani performed his innovative stitch-less "Iceberg" surgical excision of the lesion, followed by an amniotic membrane (human placenta) graft, leaving Vangilder completely Pterygium-free. Vangilder giggles, noting, "When I went back to Dr. Abshire, he called the other doctors at the eye center in to see my eye. They couldn't believe it because my growth had been so bad." Abshire calls Gulani a genius. "He's made people see that couldn't see," said Abshire. "He does combination surgeries with advanced LASIK that restore vision back to good acuity. Anytime we have a patient with corneal disease, he's the physician of choice." Recently, Vangilder returned to Gulani for advanced LASIK surgery in both eyes. She says she plans to bring her mother over from Brazil for LASIK soon. "I'm happy," she said, "except that today, I saw the dust under my bed for the first time!"

As for Gulani's walk-in patient, Willie Wilson, his vision is 20/20 and he plans to work security at St. Luke's Hospital for a very long time. Wilson sometimes walks across the street to visit his friends at Gulani Vision Institute. "Dr. Gulani treated me like family," he said. "I'm very grateful. No more Coke bottle glasses."