



Photographs by Hiroko Masuike for The New York Times

A patient-family reunion yesterday marking the 50th anniversary of the Institute of Reconstructive Plastic Surgery at New York University Medical Center included a cake.

50 Years of Helping Faces of All Ages Smile

Reconstructive Surgery Institute Marks Milestone With a Reunion of Special Patients

By MANNY FERNANDEZ

It was a celebration of imperfection.

George Barboza, 31, who was born without a left eye and underwent one operation after another on his face and his left hand, supplied music, playing piano in the corner.

Devin Jae Fantauzzi, 19, sat at a table loaded with balloons and candies, eager — after a lifetime of operations to correct her cleft lip and palate — to make a speech, to be the center of attention.

And there was Gisela Dossey, 41, who carefully described her old face — the caved-in middle section, beak-shaped nose and bulging eyes of someone with Crouzon syndrome. She let her new one, courtesy of the doctors at the Institute of Reconstructive Plastic Surgery at New York University Medical Center, speak for itself.

"I think they did a heck of a job," Mrs. Dossey said.

Those three and about 100 of the institute's other patients gathered in a banquet room yesterday at the Union League Club, on 37th Street near Park Avenue, for a reunion of sorts. Each year, the institute, which is marking its 50th anniversary, treats thousands of children and adults who are physically disfigured.

Many, like Mrs. Dossey, were born with severe facial defects that impaired their ability to breathe or eat. They were the outcasts of a society obsessed with supermodels and extreme makeovers, often heckled as children and ostracized as adults for their deformities.

Yesterday, they came with family members to thank the institute's doctors, nurses and staff members for performing operations and providing services that helped them blend in a little better. They spoke of the hardships of their lives before surgery — the stares in restaurants and the torment in school, the feelings of guilt and shame — and of brighter futures afterward.

Plastic surgery was not something they



Gisela Dossey, 41, who spoke about the nine operations that doctors with the institute performed on her, with Dr. Joseph G. McCarthy, director of the institute.

underwent to look more beautiful, but more normal. But they learned something about the nature of beauty along the way.

"You can be as pretty as you want to be on the outside, but if you're ugly on the inside, it'll show on the outside," said Ms. Fantauzzi, 19, who is now studying communications and public relations at Valencia Community College in Orlando, Fla. "I don't think people understand that."

Patients like Ms. Fantauzzi confidently stood at a lectern at the front of the room to tell their stories. Some showed slides of their old faces and their new lives as they read prepared remarks. Nearly everyone had a scar and a tale with a happy ending.

People openly discussed how they used to look, some talking humorously about their noses, their eyes, their lips. But they spoke with tears in their eyes about the gratitude they felt to doctors and to their own families. Packages of tissues had been placed at every table.

Mrs. Dossey, who lives in Cincinnati, said her defect was like a blessing, making her work harder at everything she did. She told institute doctors, who performed nine operations on her, beginning in 1985, that all she wanted was to look generic, to blend in.

"Thank you for this package," she said, during one of about two dozen presentations from patients. "I really love it."

Sage Volkman was just 5 years old when she lost her nose, all of her fingers and an ear in a camper fire in New Mexico in 1986. She had third- and fourth-degree burns on more than 70 percent of her body. Doctors at the institute have performed most of her 78 operations. She is now a 24-year-old graduate student at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City, and says she wants to spend her life counseling burn victims.

Her father, Michael Volkman, 60, said his daughter was a fighter who shrugs off stares. "If you have a problem with the way she looks, it's your problem, not hers," he said.

A couple of tables away sat Tina Walsh, 41, and her 9-year-old son, Brendan, who was born with Crouzon syndrome, as were many of the patients at the institute. Ms. Walsh said that after he was operated on in 2000, children did not stare as much at Brendan, who is in the fourth grade at River Elementary School in Patchogue, N.Y.

"The greatest gift that they've given to children and young adults is the gift of fitting in," she said of the institute.

The institute receives financial support from the National Foundation for Facial Reconstruction, a nonprofit organization. Through the foundation's funding and the donated time from doctors, many patients pay little or nothing for their treatment, depending on their financial need.

"There isn't a division between the haves and the have-nots here," said Dr. Joseph G. McCarthy, the director of the institute.

Dr. McCarthy, 66, a professor of plastic surgery at the New York University School of Medicine who performed many of the patients' operations, walked through the room yesterday, hugging old friends and colleagues. He was part of a crowd of parents and children who stood around a cake with big "50" candles atop its white icing. The group sang "Happy Birthday," and then several children, children with smiling faces, blew out the candles.