

Dr. Judith Hellman

A Life In Balance

by Wendy Lewis

Music and skin form a beautiful harmony in the life of Dr. Judith Hellman. A dermatologist with a thriving practice on Central Park South, Dr. Hellman began her professional life as a trained classical violinist and accomplished jazz pianist. But that's not the only unique twist to her remarkable career. Born in Hungary under the communist regime, Dr. Hellman escaped to Israel with her mother at the age of 15, served in the Israeli army and ultimately moved to the U.S. to study music and medicine. This bounty of life experience has formed a unique practitioner, one who values patient care, connection and healing, above all else.

You might say that medicine is a birthright of Dr. Hellman, who is a fellow of the American Academy of Dermatology, American Society for Laser Surgery and Medicine, Dermatologic Society of Greater New York and others. Both of her parents were physicians and Holocaust survivors, obtaining their medical degrees in Hungary. They divorced when she was just five months old and her late father Lawrence retrained as a dermatologist in the U.S., becoming a member of the dermatologic faculty of Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York. Her mother, Vera Rados retrained as an allergist/immunologist and continues to practice medicine in a methadone clinic in Tel Aviv, Israel.

Naturally, Dr. Hellman's parents encouraged her to study medicine, but she dreamt of being a musician or an actress, professions that would give her the freedom to express herself more flamboyantly. She studied violin from a young age—and was forced to leave her beloved hand-made violin in Hungary—

but veered toward jazz as a young adult.

Her life has entailed overcoming many transitional challenges, not the least of which was moving to Israel from Hungary as a teenager. "It was a very tough transition; it took me years to get my balance back. I moved from a communist regime and one type of philosophical system to an entirely different one. Israel was very into religion and national pride—concepts that were really foreign to me at the time," Dr. Hellman said.

The challenges became even more acute when at the age of 18, Dr. Hellman was required to join the Israeli army. "I truly didn't want to enlist. I felt I had no business being in the Israeli army, but it turned out to be a blessing in disguise and the best time of my life," she said. During this time, she accepted the values of Israel, and also discovered up close how to become an independent person. "Giving a young person a lot of responsibility brings a level of true independence," she said.

After the army, she earned a scholarship to study jazz at the renowned Berklee College of Music and moved to Boston to begin another chapter in her life. "Going to Berklee was a difficult adjustment for me. I was a Hungarian woman from Israel with an obvious foreign accent, who stuck out from the rest of the student body. Hanging out with my

fellow students, I acquired the lingo of jazz musicians, which surprised a lot of people when they would first meet me," Dr. Hellman explained.

Switching from violin to jazz piano, Dr. Hellman graduated Berklee and tried her hand at the music business. "You may play music at an extremely high level, but you can't always make a living at it," she said. Her frustration with the business of music and her love of human interaction led her to reconsider the Hellman family legacy of medicine. "I wanted to do something that would foster a human connection and allow me to get to know people on a more individual basis," she said. "Medicine became my way of expressing my artistic flair and creativity."

So back to school she headed, this time as a pre-med major at Wellesley College in Massachusetts, followed by attendance at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York City, where she received her MD in 1989. Next came an internship in internal medicine at New York's Beth Israel Medical Center and a residency in Dermatology at SUNY Stony Brook, where she served as chief resident in dermatology. Dr. Hellman became board certified in dermatology in 1994, and moved back to Manhattan to start her life as a dermatologist.

Today, Dr. Hellman runs a successful solo

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practice flanked by The Plaza Hotel and The Ritz Carlton, among other New York landmarks. As her office is easy to access from all parts of the city, she proudly sees patients from all corners of New York as well as a lot of visitors from Europe and Israel—cases that are divided evenly between medical and cosmetic. Unlike many practices that schedule eight to 10 patients per hour, she schedules no more than four people per hour. “I have a boutique approach. It doesn’t matter if my patients want to have their wrinkles injected or to cure their psoriasis, I give them the same amount of time and attention—whatever is required by their needs,” she said.

In fact, she feels accepting Medicare patients is a moral obligation. “As a doctor, you have to be passionate about caring for people, and there has to be value to what you do. If you are in dermatology only for the money, you are doing it for the wrong reason.”

Dr. Hellman’s practice specializes in dermatological surgery, laser surgery and anti-aging skin treatments. A perfect day for Dr. Hellman comprises a variety of different medical and cos-

metic procedures—acne, eczema, laser treatments, psoriasis, and injections of Dysport®, Radiesse, Juvederm and Restylane. “The day I stop seeing medical dermatology patients is the day I will stop being a dermatologist,” she said.

Acne treatments fill a very special niche in her practice, as she has perfected an unprecedented laser treatment. The treatment she has had great success with targets the underlying blood vessels that support recurring pimples and cysts, rather than just trying to temporarily eliminate bacteria. “This is something I’m very proud of. I haven’t raised the price of this treatment in seven years because I really want to make it accessible to young people who need it most. Severe acne can be disfiguring and greatly affects self esteem.”

Another point of pride is the relationships she forms with her patients. Eighty percent of her referrals are from word of mouth. “This is the result of establishing real human relationships with my patients,” she said. She believes firmly that the healing process requires giving patients the opportunity to tell their story. “What I love most about being a

dermatologist is that I get to know many people up close and personal. The skin conditions are not so unique, but the people are,” she said.

Harmony continues to play a role in her personal as well as professional life. Her son Michael, 13, is a gifted musician who plays guitar, sings and composes—a “natural-born songwriter,” according to his mother. His father and Dr. Hellman’s ex husband, is Ron Eliran, an Israeli musician, songwriter and composer who is very well known in Jewish circles. Michael has clearly inherited his musical talent and aspirations from both of his parents.

As for the ongoing connection between music and dermatology, Dr. Hellman said they both require a type of perfectionism. “I strive to play notes perfectly and I strive to give as perfect a treatment outcome as possible in my practice.” **M**

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