

DR. ROBERT LACIN

Photographs by Michael Zirkle

North Carolina Symphony Trustee Dr. Robert Lacin moved to Raleigh in 2005 and joined the Symphony Society Board in 2007. Born in Turkey and educated in Israel and Switzerland, Dr. Lacin completed his medical training at St. Vincent's Hospital in New York, Northwestern University Medical School and Duke University and has a distinguished career as a neurosurgeon. Now in private practice in Raleigh, Dr. Lacin is an active member of several medical and neurosurgical societies, has consulting and teaching posts at Duke University Medical Center and UNC-Chapel Hill, and is active in international neurosurgical education.

THE BEGINNING

I was born in Izmir, Turkey. It used to be a very quaint, charming small town on the Aegean coast. When I left Turkey in 1971, the population was about 250,000 and now it has over three million. A lot of people moved from the country to the larger cities for jobs, so it grew very fast.

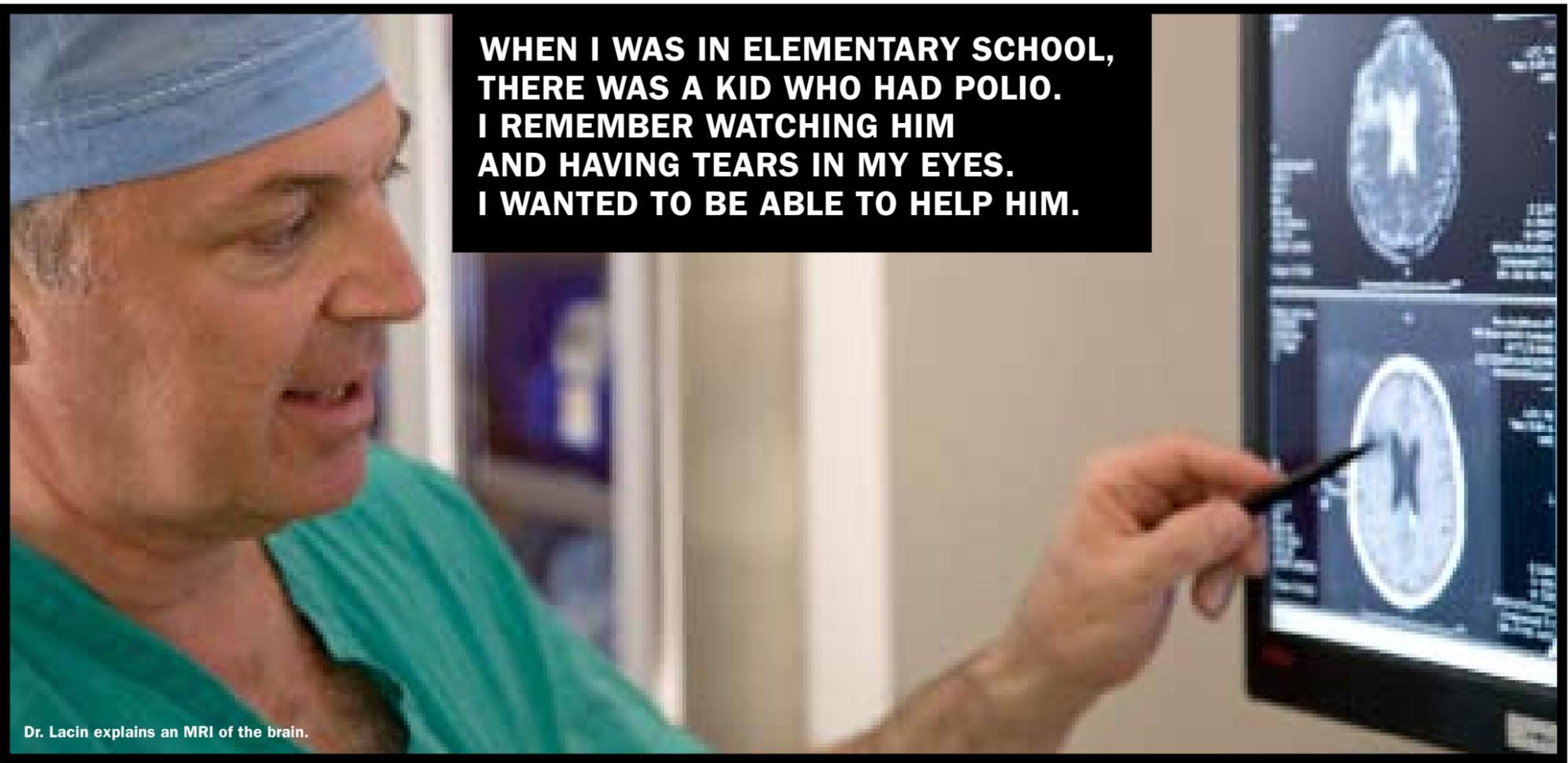
GUILTY PLEASURE

I love smoking a really good cigar once in a while. People shouldn't smoke, but I don't think having a cigar now and then is that harmful. I really enjoy tobacco. If cigarettes were not so bad for you, I'd be smoking right now. I quit smoking when my daughter was born. I would smoke two or three cigarettes a day and enjoy every one of them.

FAVORITE CHORE

I'm limited to what kind of jobs I can do around the house because of my hands. A blister or a cut can definitely bother me in surgery. I really enjoy taking the dog out late at night, when everyone else has gone to bed. It's a relaxing time for me when it's dark and quiet and peaceful.





WHEN I WAS IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, THERE WAS A KID WHO HAD POLIO. I REMEMBER WATCHING HIM AND HAVING TEARS IN MY EYES. I WANTED TO BE ABLE TO HELP HIM.

Dr. Lacin explains an MRI of the brain.

BÊTE NOIR

People who don't do what they are supposed to do or what they've promised to do. People who won't go the extra mile.

CAUSE HE WOULD DIE FOR

To save somebody's life. I would have been that last guy that got off the plane that landed in the Hudson, making sure that everyone was okay.

EXERCISE

I don't like high impact activities like jogging. I don't like swimming – it bores me. I do not like weight-lifting because I don't think it's good for you – I'm talking about the really heavy body-building kind of weight lifting. I think you pay for that later. I like yoga and Pilates and recommend them to my patients. More recently I re-started martial arts. It's something I used to do when I was in my late teens. It's a great form of exercise that develops your balance, your endurance, stretches and strengthens your muscles and works significantly on your core muscles.

ALTERNATE CAREER PLANS

There was a time when I thought I might want to be a hotel manager. I thought it would be kind of cool to help people feel comfortable, give them great food, make their surroundings really nice. But then I worked in hotels during school vacations and realized that dealing with people in hotels is a very difficult job. People become abusive in hotels, especially rich people. So I gave up on that idea very quickly.

LAST MEAL

I would want some feta cheese, bread and good olive oil. Also peppers, tomatoes and olives – black Turkish olives.

CIRCADIAN RHYTHMS

I am not a morning person but I became one because of my profession. If it was up to me I would not wake up at 5am. It's ridiculous.

OLD ITEM HE CAN'T DISCARD

I do have old things that I like and don't get rid of in spite of the insistence of other members of my family. I have an

old cashmere sweater that is very warm and very soft and very pleasant to wear. It is also very ugly, even deformed. I wear it around the house in the winter. I've had it for years and years.

ON THE BEDSIDE TABLE

Secret History of the Mongols: The Origin of Chingis Khan. It's a really fascinating book, based on secret papers recently found in China. Another interesting book I read recently is by Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Social Responsibility.* And I recently saw an exhibit at the Imperial War Museum in London on Ian Fleming and James Bond. I ended up reading the book: *Ian Fleming and James Bond.*

MORNING ROUTINE

I have to have a cup of coffee as soon as I get up. I turn on the coffee machine, then I go wake up my children. But that first cup of coffee – I can actually feel the way it awakens me, how it is working on my brain and waking me up. I'm definitely a caffeine addict. I have an espresso machine

everywhere I go – at home, the office, our place at the beach. I like making coffee – when I have time I make Turkish coffee. I profoundly dislike drinking coffee from a Styrofoam or paper cup.

HUMAN ROSETTA STONE

I speak Turkish, Hebrew, Spanish, Italian, French and English. It's not that I have such a passion for languages; it's just circumstances of life. I lived in these countries and was immersed in the culture. And once you have fluency in a language, it never leaves you. I don't speak Turkish every day, or Italian every day, but when I'm in those countries, it comes back. I might be slow, searching for words at first, but maybe by the fourth day I'm fluent again.

KARMA

I don't believe in the interference of some kind of cosmic power in my daily life. At the same time, I have a hard time explaining all sorts of things that have happened to me. I have very mixed feelings about this and my point of view on the subject

changes back and forth from one week or day to the next. There are things that happen to us that nobody can really explain. I do believe that there are people who have God's hand on their shoulder and others who are maybe overlooked somehow.

WORK ETHIC

When I was 13, my father lost everything. We moved to Israel to start over again. We had an apartment, but nothing to go in it. Family and friends helped us out. We did buy beds, I remember that, and I slept in this same bed until I left for the Israeli military at 19. When my kids visited this apartment and first saw this thin little mattress, there was a moment of silence. The apartment is in an exclusive area of Tel Aviv and the kids who went to my school came from rich families. They wanted to do things on the weekends – go to the movies and things like that but I had to work. That was a little bit tough. My first job was the summer of 1972 when I was 14 and I worked every vacation after that. In retrospect, it was a good lesson. I wouldn't be where I am today if I grew up in Turkey, the son of a rich guy who was going to take over the business someday.

LESSON LEARNED FROM ISRAELI MILITARY SERVICE

Humanity!

DEFINING MOMENT

When I was in elementary school, there was a little kid who had polio. He had braces like Forrest Gump. He could not walk easily or play with the other kids. His father used to bring him to events like birthday parties, then carry him from the car to the house where he would go sit somewhere by himself. I remember so clearly watching him and feeling tears in my eyes. It was my first experience with empathy. I wanted to be able to help him and this need to help became a dominant force in my life. To me, it is a spiritual obligation.

OTHER INFLUENCES

I was powerfully influenced by *The Story of San Michele*, written by a Swedish doctor named Axel Munthe. He won the Nobel prize for it. I was probably ten years old when I read it the first time. Munthe was a good doctor and he took care of the rich and the poor equally. He was very humane and also cared deeply for animals. My son's middle name is Axel, after this doctor. The aspect of taking care of patients is what attracted

me to medicine. I was really motivated by my father. He was a self-made business man who never graduated from high school because his father got sick and he had to go to work. But he was in love with medicine. He bought me books about medicine and doctors. I really fell in love with Albert Schweitzer. For me, it has never been about the glamour or the money. I really wanted to help people.

THE MAKING OF A PHYSICIAN

I started medical school in Genoa, Italy, on the Ligurian coast which gave me the opportunity to work as a security officer on Israeli cargo ships to support myself. But the university there was too big and impersonal so I transferred to the University of Lausanne in Switzerland and completed my medical education there in 1986. I received a fellowship to stay on after graduation for about a year and a half to train with a famous peripheral nerve surgeon, Professor Narakas. We became very close and I saw him as my mentor. Narakas was a great person – he taught me so many things about life and patient care; he was almost a father to me. Learning to become a physician is an apprenticeship. You don't become a doctor by reading texts, going to lectures, doing research, examining patients and learning surgical techniques. You learn by watching your mentor in the operating room, and with patients. In Europe, personal relationships like this are much more important in the education of physicians. I was very lucky. I see myself as a very fortunate person – being in the right place at the right time, many many times. And being away from the wrong place at the right time, too!

ST. VINCENT'S TO GOLDSBORO

I decided to come to New York for internship at St. Vincent's Hospital in downtown Manhattan. This was a real experience – especially coming from Switzerland where there was almost no violence. From a medical point of view, St. Vincent's was culture shock for me. I was busier than I had ever been and there were absolutely shocking injuries coming into the hospital. I'd never seen anything like it. But it was a great internship – I learned emergency room skills and how to take care of patients in a hospital. At the end of it, I felt comfortable taking care of very sick people. I did my residency at Northwestern University Medical School in Chicago. I finished one year early and came to Duke for a year of



**AS I PROGRESS IN MY LIFE,
I REACH THE CONCLUSION THAT
A PERSON'S HUMANITY IS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING.**

The Lacins: (left to right) standing: Honor, with Midas; Eli, Dr. Lacin; son-in-law Jake. Seated: Lesley, Emily

research. I was recruited by a headhunter for a job in Goldsboro where there was no neurosurgeon. I may have been a little overconfident, thinking I could do everything. Overall, I did well and my practice grew to a three-surgeon group.

A DAY IN THE LIFE

I perform surgery on the brain and spinal cord and the nerves and anything that is somehow attached to them. We take care of patients with brain tumors, bleeds, carpal tunnel – fixable brain and spinal problems. This is our bread and butter, and I really love this. A great day in surgery is when I do a brain tumor, a pinched nerve in the neck, a carpal tunnel and maybe something else. Some surgeons prefer to be very specialized, and I think this is the right thing, but to me, that really bores me to death. I see myself more as more of a general surgeon in neurosurgery with a sub-specialty in peripheral nerve surgery.

IN THE ZONE

It's an altered state of consciousness, there's no question about that. There was a very famous doctor from France who came to our clinic in Switzerland every few months to perform surgeries on infants with nerve damage. He always appeared to be working at a normal pace, but his surgeries were much quicker than everyone else's. I couldn't figure it out. I finally asked him about this one day. He said, "When

I operate, I don't think. Before I begin, I imagine exactly what I am going to do and then I go in and do it and get out of there. Thinking too much during surgery slows you down." I try to emulate that and to be as prepared as I can be for every surgery. I can go in the operating room, get in the zone, do the surgery and get out. If I am distracted or worried about something, it doesn't go as well. You can only reach that point after you have mastered the technical aspects of what you are doing. The Japanese have a name for it – *mushin*. It means "no mind." It's muscle memory, to some degree.

INTUITION

I used to be extremely intuitive. I used to like being with somebody and really feel that person. But as a physician, I oblige myself to be less intuitive and to rely more on scientific data so gradually I lost that ability. I want to be more in tune with people – when I'm with my patients, I try not to take notes, but to listen and really feel them more.

FAMILY LIFE

One of my biggest regrets in life is not concentrating sufficiently on my family when I was building a neurosurgical practice in the first years of my career. Now, I make a point of this. We have at least one, if not two, big family vacations a year and we all love it. Quality time is important

but quantity of face-to-face time is as important if not more.

WARM HANDS

On Saturday mornings, my father would go to work and I had school. Then we'd all eat lunch at home and he would take a short nap – about a half hour. Then we would go out and visit some kind of business, a metal manufacturer, or a printing house, or we'd go to the library or buy books. I have this memory of holding his hand as we walked around and how his hands were always warm. He never wore gloves, even when it was cold. At the end of the afternoon, we would go to a pastry shop for tea and then go home. This is my most cherished memory from childhood.

LOSS

My father died about three years ago. It awakened emotions I had not felt before. I thought that I had not spent enough time with him, I thought about conversations we hadn't had and that now we never could have. His death has been very hard for me to get over. It's lingering, non-stop. I look at his picture and I think of the love and admiration I felt for him. I had a video of my father on my computer – it was an interview that my brother did with him a few years before he died. I could look at it whenever I wanted to and it would feel just as if I was having a conversation with him. Then someone hacked into my computer

and I lost all my data. I didn't care about anything on that computer except this video. I was so upset. Fortunately, everything was restored. If I ever find out who did that, he will have a really bad day.

MUSIC

When I was growing up, we didn't have any luxuries. I think my parents would have liked for me to learn how to play a musical instrument. But I was playing soccer in the streets and I wasn't interested. I thought it was too girly. There were no boys that I knew that were playing piano or violin. But my father loved music. He was the first person in our town to have a stereo system. I remember listening to the Sgt. Pepper album over and over. My father learned about Jascha Heifetz and these other great musicians – he educated himself about these things. There was a tiny little symphony in Izmir and as soon as he started earning some money we would go to the symphony. One time he forced my grandmother to go – my grandmother who spent her life in the kitchen and always had an apron on. Nobody noticed and so she showed up at the symphony with her apron on.

MAKING IT ACCESSIBLE

When I heard at a Board meeting that Yo-Yo Ma was coming, I started thinking about what an amazing opportunity for young cellists to come and hear Yo-Yo Ma play, meet him and talk to him. What can inspire you more than meeting someone you admire, who is in the media, who is an amazing guy? My wife and I realized that the people who would really appreciate hearing a performance like this maybe can't afford it. We talked to Becky Lyman, our cello teacher, and asked how can we get this done? Can we get teachers to collect a number of students from their studios and I'll see if I can raise some money for tickets? She thought this would be a great idea. In the meantime I shot an email to maybe 10-12 people I know who I thought could afford to buy a ticket. The next morning, I had tears in my eyes because in less than 24 hours I had enough money to buy 20 tickets. Later we ended up with 30 tickets. The students were able to come to the rehearsal in the morning and meet Mr. Ma in person afterwards. In the evening, they came to the performance. We received cards from the teachers – they said the kids were so inspired by the performance and from meeting Yo-Yo Ma that their practices were much more intense. It was really wonderful. It was a life-changing experience for them.

THE CASE STATEMENT

The more I progress in my life in my adult years as a physician, human being, father, husband, the more I have reached the conclusion that a person's humanity is the most important feature of his or her personality. If you are a doctor or a director of a company, don't lose your humanity. Be a human being, or as they say in Yiddish, be a mensch. Be a person that can be trusted at their word. Have empathy, have compassion and at the same

time, have the strength to do something. If you'd asked me 15 years ago what is my greatest strength as a physician, I would have said, "I can put a stitch really, really deep in the brain." That's important, but now I think what is really important is to be compassionate. I see myself as a very compassionate doctor. You want a surgeon who operates with his heart. In some way, you need to love the guy you are operating on.



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