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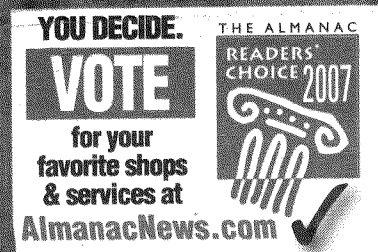
THE HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER FOR MENLO PARK, AHERTON, PORTOLA

VALLEY AND WOODSIDE

JUNE 27, 2007

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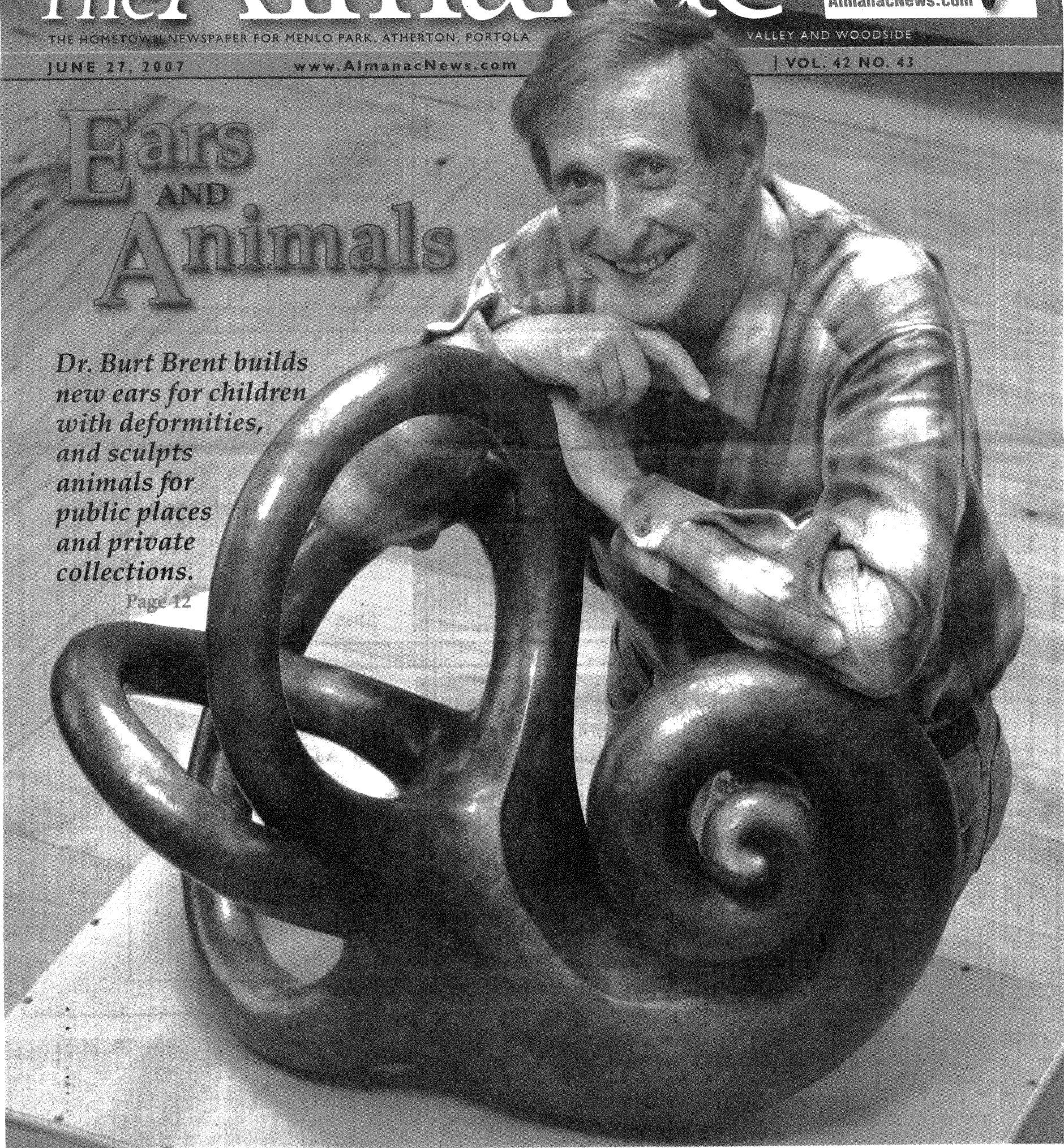
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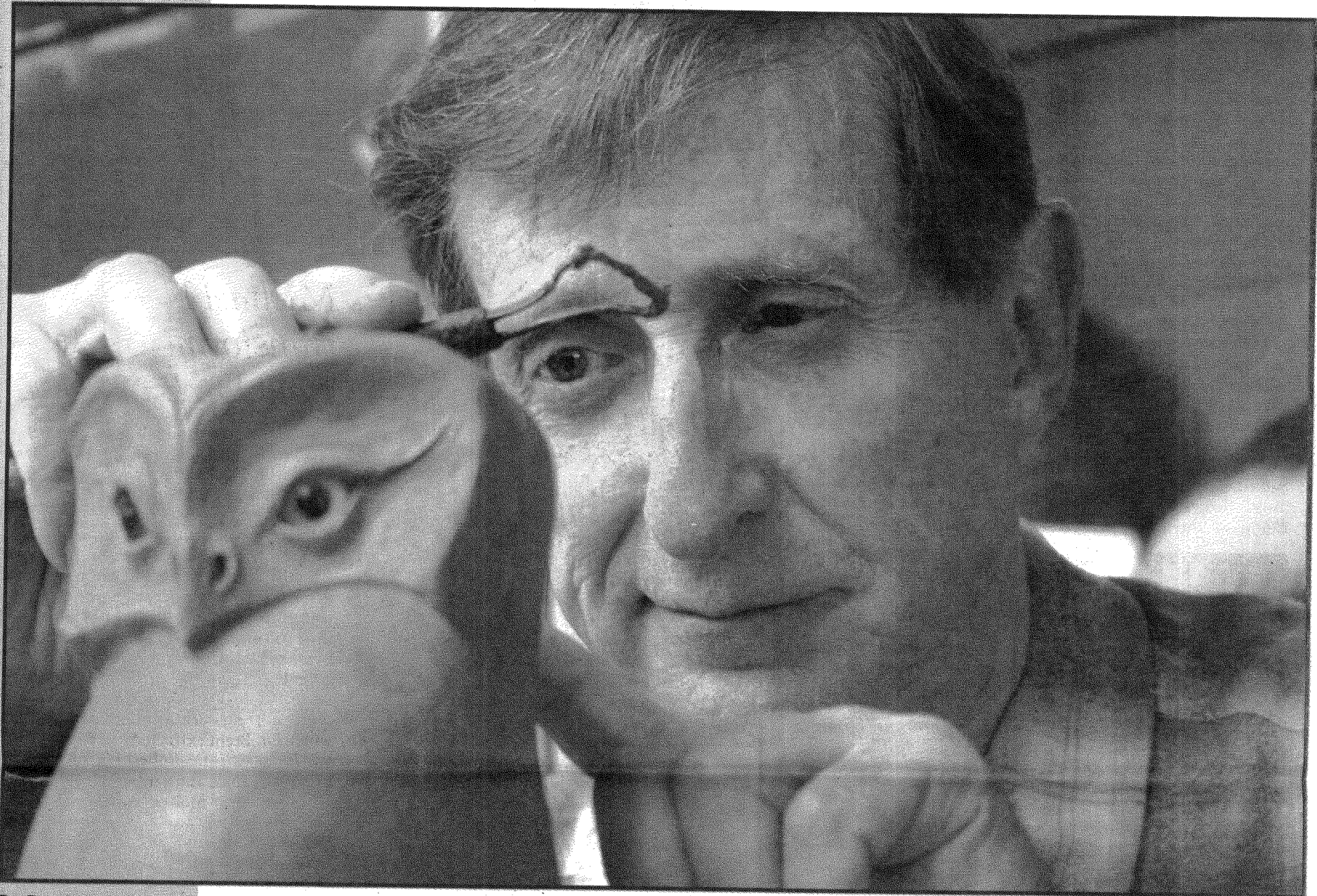
## Ears AND Animals

*Dr. Burt Brent builds  
new ears for children  
with deformities,  
and sculpts  
animals for  
public places  
and private  
collections.*

Page 12



# Dr. Burt Brent creates



Dr. Burt Brent puts finishing touches on an elegant owl in his Portola Valley studio. For 20 years, the plastic surgeon has been sculpting animals that end up in zoos, public places and private collections.

Story by  
**Marion  
Softky**  
Photos by  
**Veronica  
Weber**

## *Portola Valley plastic surgeon builds new ears for children with deformities, and sculpts animals for zoos, public places and private collections*

Anyone who has taken children — or been a child — at the San Francisco Zoo lately has likely delighted in watching kids scrambling up and skidding off of the snoozing bronze hippo between the hippopotamus and lion enclosures.

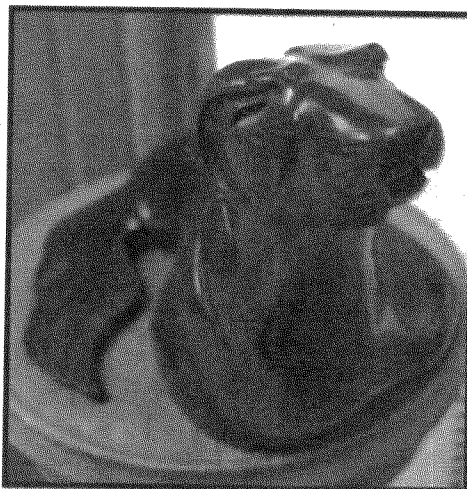
Or climbing the brigade of 5-foot-high bronze geese guarding the entrance to the Children's Zoo.

Few of these people know the story behind "Heavy Weight" and "Barnyard Watchdogs," or the artist who created them.

Sculpting large and small animals in bronze, stainless steel and other media is actually a sideline for Dr. Burt Brent of Portola Valley.

Dr. Brent, a plastic surgeon with an office in Woodside, has built his career and an international reputation on creating living ears for children born without ears or with deformed ears. He has pioneered a technique for building new ears out of the kid's own rib cartilage; the ears actually grow as the child grows.

Over the last 30 years, Dr. Brent has provided real ears — and the dignity that goes with them — to more than 1,800 chil-



This whimsical seal greets visitors at Dr. Burt Brent's Woodside medical office.

dren from all over the world. In 2005 he received the Clinician of the Year Award for lifetime achievement from the American Association of Plastic Surgeons.

Officially, Dr. Brent is an associate professor at the Stanford Medical Center. He does six to eight operations a week as a staff surgeon at El Camino Hospital in Moun-

tain View. The hospital — appropriately — features a large bronze statue of clasped hands by Dr. Brent at the entrance, and another hippo in the maternity wing.

"I have a couple of careers. I really do," says Dr. Brent cheerfully during an interview in the bright studio beside his Portola Valley home. "I hate to waste time to sleep."

Youthful, wiry and energetic, Dr. Brent pursues his careers and interests with passion. Not just art and medicine, but also music and nature. As an intern, he learned to play the banjo, and built one. With banjo great Earl Scruggs he wrote and illustrated "Earl Scruggs and the Five-Stringed Banjo." It was published in 1968, with a new edition in 2003.

"I've never met a banjo player who didn't learn from our work," Dr. Brent says. "How I ever found time to write it I'll never know."

The Brents' woodsy home, surrounded by a thicket of rhododendrons, shows Belinda Brent's passion for the showy flowers. It is a stop on the national rhododendron tour, says Dr. Brent proudly. Ms. Brent is also a clinical psychologist and a competitive

# ears and animals



The sculptured bronze ear shows the same artistry Dr. Brent uses to carve new ears out of living tissue for children born with deformed ears.

figure skater. They have no children.

That doesn't worry Dr. Brent. "I have 1,800 children," he says. "I feel they are my children."

## Born an artist

Dr. Brent must have genes for art, medicine and nature. "I came out of the womb doing art. I can never remember not doing it," he says.

As a kid, he got a healthy dose of all three. He grew up in Detroit, where his father, a doctor, had an office in the basement; he spent summers with his grandparents in the country. He adored his maternal grandfather, a cabinet maker who started painting at age 72; his grandfather was teaching him to build drawers, toys and animal cages by age 6. "We're the same person," he says. "I am an absolute clone of him."

Young Burt started collecting insects when he was 4. By 13, he apprenticed to a taxidermist, every weekend,

and made a hobby of finding road kill and fixing them up. And he still does; a couple of small, elegant, very real skunks are on display in his studio.

"Taxidermy was a great foundation for my other sculptures," Dr. Brent says. "In taxidermy, you're doing a sculpture and draping a skin over it; in sculpture, you're putting on an extra layer of clay."

Dr. Brent recalls announcing to his father that he wanted to be an artist when he grew up. "He said, 'Son, art's a hobby; do something useful like I do.'"

These threads of early childhood passions came together as Dr. Brent went to medical school in Chicago; he soon realized that reconstructive surgery combined his goals in medicine and art. "I love taking care of people," he says. "I wanted to help people through my art. That's why I went into plastic surgery."

In plastic surgery, Dr. Brent soon discovered the most difficult and most sculptural task was building an ear out of the patient's own living tissue. "Only one man could do it, and he was retiring," he says.

Dr. Radford Tanzer became Dr. Brent's friend and mentor, and passed along the techniques that Dr. Brent has perfected. He, in turn, has passed his methods on to other surgeons in places as far flung as Paris, France; Bogota, Colombia; and Malmo, Sweden.

"With my art and love of children, it was a natural," says Dr. Brent. "This is the only thing we do in plastic surgery that is truly sculpture."

## Ear all about it

Dr. Brent does six to eight surgeries a week to repair microtia, the condition where babies are born with little or no outer ear. The condition occurs in one

out of 5,000 to 7,000 births, according to Dr. Brent's Web site, [earsurgery.com](http://earsurgery.com).

In the three-stage operation, the surgeon first opens the chest of the child and removes cartilage from the rib cage. Then he sculpts the cartilage into an ear. Then he opens a slit by the ear and inserts the base of the new ear into a pocket under the skin.

"It is like trying to place five pounds of plaster in a two-pound bag, but doing it with living tissue," writes Dr. Brent on his Web site. "It (cartilage) has the consistency of thick fibrous carrot," he adds.

All this must be done in one surgical session. Thirty years and 1,800 kids ago, it took Dr. Brent six to eight hours. "Now I do the whole thing in a little over two hours, and the patient is out of the hospital the next morning.



Dr. Brent shows former patient Michael Noah, far left, and his father, Craig Noah, what his ear looked like six years ago, before he created two new ears for Michael, who is now 12.

## Michael Noah's life transformed by ears from Dr. Burt Brent

Michael Noah was born 12 years ago with no ears, no ear canals, and no eardrums. "It looked like two little wads of gum stuck to his head," says his father, Craig Noah of Mountain View.

His parents were devastated — for at least a day. "By the day after, we knew about Dr. Brent," Mr. Noah says.

By the time he was 6, Michael could understand why he needed new ears and cooperated in the operation and recovery. It took six operations over a year-and-a-half to make him whole.

Dr. Brent built two ears for Michael in two separate operations. Now Michael has two small scars near the bottom of his ribs where Dr. Brent extracted cartilage to sculpt two living ears. Dr. Robert Jahrsdorfer gave him root canals and eardrums.

Now, Michael looks like a normal 12-year-old; his ears have grown with him. He'll be starting eighth grade in the fall, he plays baseball and football, likes science, and is a Boy Scout first class.

Michael is not completely comfortable talking about the changes in his life. It was "kind of annoying" not having ears, he admits. Now, he says: "They help me fit in the classroom. ... When I got my ears, it helped my hearing."

Last week, a photo shoot in Dr. Brent's Woodside office turned into a reunion; the chemistry sizzles between Dr. Brent and the Noahs. "The families become my best buddies," says Dr. Brent, giving Michael a hug.

The office itself is a magical setting for stressed kids and their parents. Upholstered seats and floor are covered with a zoo of stuffed animals, mostly gifts from patients. Brilliant fish glide around a free-standing aquarium. And every nook contains a sculptured animal; for starters, there's a large crane with a topknot, running deer, a polar bear, a lynx, and an antelope. All the sculptures are Dr. Brent's work, except for the dashing deer.

Dr. Brent recalls his first visit with Michael. "He was bouncing around like popcorn, so I said, 'Sit still you dufus, I'd like to examine you.'"

One of the animals, a plush kangaroo, has a little red heart hanging from its neck engraved with a "dufus" message to Dr. Brent from the Noahs.

"He's from heaven," says Lynn Noah. "He's children's gift."

See **EAR & ANIMALS**, page 14

— Marion Softky

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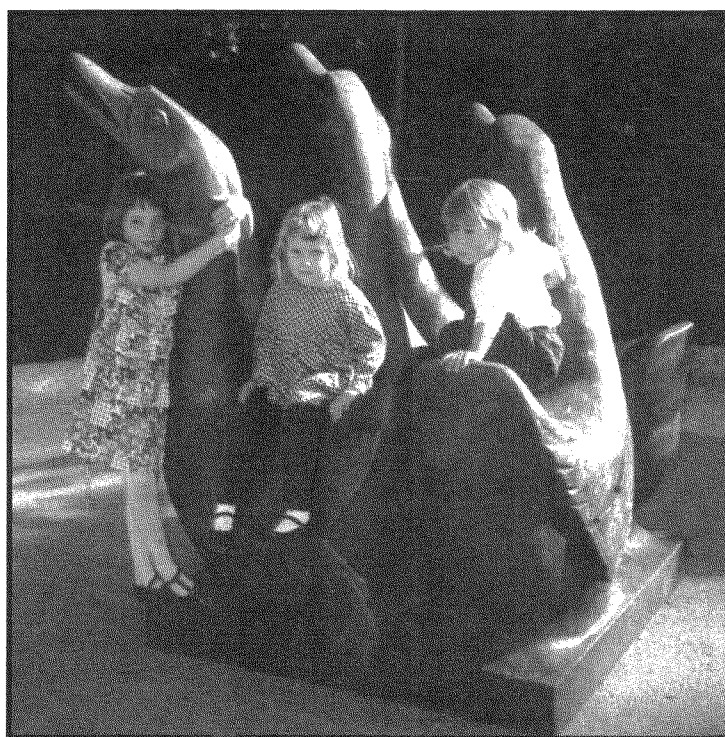
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**Thousands of children** have scrambled on these geese guarding the Children's Zoo at the San Francisco Zoo. The plaque by the "Barnyard Watchdogs" reads: "Created and Donated by Dr. Burt Brent, surgeon and friend of children, sculptor and friend of animals."

Photo by Dr. Burt Brent

### EAR & ANIMALS

continued from page 13

"It's called practice."

Over those years, Dr. Brent has gained a huge number of fans. Just a few weeks ago a girl from Hawaii he had operated on when she was 6, turned up in his office. She had just graduated from medical school. "That was nice," he says.

Dr. Brent doesn't just do ears for children; about 10 percent of his work is rebuilding ears damaged in injuries or accidents. Some of his tales are really gory. He operated on a prosecuting attorney who was attacked in court by the defendant, who jumped out of the dock and bit off his ear — and spit it out.

Even worse was the Texas cop who was attacked while stopping a suspect. This time the suspect not only bit off his ear, he swallowed it. "That was really disgusting," says the surgeon.

Dr. Brent has been widely recognized. He has been featured on the Discovery Channel, the Learning Channel, and NOVA. He has also published more than 60 professional papers and a two-volume, leather-bound book, "The Artistry of Reconstructive Surgery."

Now Dr. Brent is beginning to see the second generation of patients. People whose ears he fixed a generation ago bring in their children, with the same affliction. There is a 5 percent chance that someone with microtia will have a child with it, Dr. Brent notes.

In a gesture towards nature, Dr. Brent gives each child he works on a gift membership to Nature Conservancy. "I want to get them off on the right foot to stewardship of the planet," he says.

#### The inner ear

An abstract-seeming sculpture of three loops and a spiral holds center stage in Dr.

Brent's airy studio. It represents an inner ear. "It's my Henry Moore," he says, referring to the famous modern British sculptor.

A stroll around Dr. Brent's studio shows the range of his work since he became a serious sculptor in traditional materials, such as bronze, stainless steel and marble, on top of his regular career as a surgical sculptor.

Most are animals of various sizes and various materials. They tend to have whimsical names. The pelican trying to swallow

two fish at once is called "The Glutton." The nest of three tiny birds reaching up with open mouths is called "Feed Me." There are also smaller versions of the "Barnyard Watchdogs" in the San Francisco Zoo, and the 7-foot-tall stainless steel polar bear in the San Diego Zoo.

There's also a model for a future sculpture of his wife, Belinda Brent, figure-skating.

Dr. Brent started seriously producing animal sculptures about 20 years ago after he finished his major book on artistry in reconstructive surgery in 1987. "I was always interested in wildlife and art," he says. "I decided the day the book came out I would start spending a day a week on non-bleeding sculptures."

Now his medical office is closed every Thursday so he can work in his studio.

Dr. Brent's animal sculptures in public places have probably earned him broader recognition than his surgery. He was elected to the exclusive Society of Animal Artists, and has received its Award of Excellence four times. His works are shown in galleries in Santa Fe and Lafayette. He donates his profits to the Nature Conservancy to help preserve nature and wildlife.

What is he working on now?

"I'm thinking of making a Glutton 7 feet tall," Dr. Brent replies cheerfully. "I'm working on a little brown bear that kids can climb on."

"It's never-ending. There's always something cooking." ■

**Dr. Brent gives each child a Nature Conservancy gift membership: 'I want to get them off on the right foot to stewardship of the planet.'**



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