

Picture This: Big Smiles After Surgery

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Scott Caldwell's face is right out of a Norman Rockwell painting, with blue eyes, freckles, tousled brown hair and an infectious grin.

But his face was not always picture perfect. Born without the usual cartilage crease in his ears, he grew up being taunted for the way they protruded.

"I was getting teased, called names like Dumbo and Big Ears," said Scott, now 12, of Copiague, N.Y. "I didn't feel that good about it. I wanted to look normal."

Then, at age 6, his life was changed by surgery that remolded his ears. "I didn't have them sticking out any more," he said. "I could look in the mirror and actually see the hair behind my ears, and it was a really good feeling. Some of my brother's friends who teased me were just amazed."

A few days after his operation, Scott picked out yellow, red and blue crayons to draw before-and-after self portraits. He depicted himself first with exaggerated ear flaps, tears streaming from his eyes and his mouth a downturned crescent. Then in the second panel, with diminutive post-op ears, he is all smiles and under a bright sun.

He called his drawings "Sad Scott" and "Glad Scott."

Now his piece hangs in the center of a display of about 50 artworks by pediatric patients of a plastic surgeon from Manhasset, N.Y., and Manhattan, **Dr. Frederick N. Lukash**, who is the son of Nassau County's Medical Examiner, Dr. Leslie Lukash. The exhibit, "Art and Emotion," will be on display at the Long Island Children's Museum, at 550 Stewart Avenue here, at least through the end of the month.

"I don't think even Dr. Lukash appreciates the difference in their lives," said Janet Tenenzaph of Lynbrook, whose son, David, underwent years of operations for a cleft palate.

"We didn't think it would be like this," she said. "He's accepted by his peers and stands out -- in a positive way. He just got the lead in the fifth grade play, the musical 'Guys and Dolls.' He's playing Nathan Detroit. This never would have happened without the surgery."

One girl's self-esteem was so low that she avoided school. But now, after correction of a cleft palate, she is on the high school honor roll and planning a career in medicine. Still too self-conscious to give her name, she said: "It was hard. I'm glad it's over." In her drawing, she says: "Now I have a beautiful nose. I feel great having a regular nose." Her father said he is deeply moved by her progress. "She's become a real leader," he said. "I can't say enough about it."

Concern about physical defects arises in early grades. "With big ears, they're O.K. till about 6, then in the first grade somebody says, 'Dumbo' or 'Mickey Mouse,' " Dr. Lukash said. "All these kids want is to 'make me like the other kids, so they won't pick on me.' "

The art collection evolved from a drawing a patient gave Dr. Lukash during his medical training. He saved it and began encouraging youngsters to make drawings to help them deal with their feelings and treatment. Showing the drawings to new patients also helps ease anxiety about surgery, and illustrates happy endings.

"Amy smiled a proud smile," read the words next to a beaming face on one drawing. "For the first time, Amy's heart said, 'Ta Da, I'm free at last.' " Echoing that sense of relief, Stephen, 6, who painstakingly drew details like the anesthesia mask and the recovery room television, concluded his drawing with the caption: "Now I am all fixed up -- I am free."

Another youngster, Mike, drew himself surrounded by faces saying hurtful things that he could not forget: "Your different." "Ear Boy."

"Ha, ha." "Hey, Big Ears." "It's Ear Boy." "Do your ears hang low?" "Dumbo." "Ugly." After surgery, Dr. Lukash said, "This kid's grades went from C's to A's."

Treatment costs can be a barrier. A relatively simple procedure like flattening the ears usually runs about \$5,000, and insurance companies often refuse to pay, contending that the surgery is not medically necessary. Dr. Lukash, who has performed free surgery in Guatemala and for local adoption agencies here with hard-to-place youngsters, said he tries to find a way to get things done.

Dr. Lukash said he hoped to send the exhibit on tour to other children's museums, and maybe even turn it into a book. The working title is "Sad Scott/Glad Scott."