
PROFILE

Ben Carson

Dialogue with an Adventist Neurosurgeon



In September 1987 a young black doctor was catapulted to world-wide fame as one of the primary neurosurgeons on the Johns Hopkins University team that separated the Binder Siamese twins. Joined at the back of

their heads, the twins shared a section of skull and skin tissue as well as a major vein responsible for draining blood from the brain and returning it to the heart. The doctor: Ben Carson.

Young Ben grew up in the ghettos of Boston and Detroit. He and his brother enjoyed a happy, uneventful life until Ben was 8 years old. It was then that his mother (married at 13) divorced Ben's father after discovering his double life—another wife and children.

If the fifth-grade class had taken a vote, Ben would have won least likely to succeed. His grades were so bad that his teacher congratulated him for getting a "D" on a math exam. However, Ben's mother, despite her

third-grade education, decided to turn that around.

This new approach worked so well that Ben earned a scholarship to Yale. After graduation, he was accepted by the University of Michigan Medical School. Between his second and third years of med school, he married Candy, his college sweetheart. In 1976, Ben was two of two doctors accepted into Johns Hopkins University Hospital's neurosurgery residency (out of approximately 125 applications).

Dr. Carson is an elder at the Spencerville, Maryland, Adventist church. He is active in the health and temperance program and teaches a Sabbath school class. He and Candy have three boys.

Dr. Carson, explain how a fifth-grade nothing turned his life around.

My mother had a lot to do with it. She looked at my brother, Curtis, and at me—at our grades and general disinterest in school—and took the situation to the Lord in prayer. God impressed her that the solution was to turn off the television and to require us to read books.

I'll never forget the day she came home from work and announced that from that day on, Curtis and I were restricted to two or three pre-selected TV programs a week. In addition, we had to read two books a week and be prepared to tell her what they were about. We thought we were going to die.

It wasn't easy. Not for her nor for us, though I'm sure it was harder on her than it was on us. We had been taught to obey and, even though she wasn't home when we got in from school, we did what she required. That first week we forced our reluctant feet to take us

to the public library and we grumbled all the way. In addition, since my math grades were so terrible, Mother decided that I couldn't go out and play in the afternoon until I learned my multiplication tables.

When did things begin to get better for you?

Very quickly, actually. Once I could multiply any combination between 1 and 12, math became easy. As my grades went up, so did my self-confidence. I always enjoyed science, so I did a lot of reading on nature and animals. One day it occurred to me—as if a light flashed suddenly in my brain. If it was in a book, I could learn it. I could actually be smart. In fact, if I worked hard, I could be the smartest kid in class. That turned my life around.

You are known for being low-key, a man who works calmly under pressure. Have you always been so easy-going?

That's an interesting question. As a young person I had a terrible temper. In fact, with my study of

psychology, I know now that I had a pathological temper. I lost all reason when I got mad, and it didn't take much to make me mad.

When I was 14 I tried to stab my friend. I thank God that my camping knife bounced off the heavy buckle on his belt. As it was, I hit him so hard that the knife broke and I stood there looking at the broken blade and realized that I could have killed him. In terror at what I'd almost done, I ran home and locked myself in the bathroom so I could be alone. I wrestled with myself, and with the Lord, for a good two hours. I knew that I could never be a doctor if I didn't get control of myself, and I begged God to change me. From that terrible day my faith in God has been intensely personal and an important part of who I am.

Tell us, briefly, how you achieved what you are today.

To begin, I give God the credit and the glory. I have been greatly blessed. After my residency at Hopkins, I spent a year in Australia. There I was able to

learn and perform complicated surgeries that I would have not been able to perform in several years in the U.S. When I returned home and joined the staff at Hopkins, I was able to put this experience to good use.

If you'll pardon my being personal, you still look rather young.

Yes, and I looked even younger when I became chief of pediatric neurosurgery at age 33. Time and time again, parents of sick children would ask me when the doctor would be in. It was probably a combination of my youthful looks and my being black. But as my work has become widely known, people aren't surprised anymore.

You have done several hemispherectomies—the removal of half the brain. Tell us about this unusual surgery.

My first hemispherectomy patient was a little girl named Miranda. In 1985 she was having 120 to 160 seizures every day. She had a condition that inflamed her brain tissue. The prognosis was paralysis and death. Her parents refused to give up and finally contacted Johns Hopkins Hospital. After careful study, I believed that this little-known procedure could be successful. It had been performed 50 years ago without success. But modern inventions and techniques made me believe it could be done. Without surgery, Miranda faced certain death. And so, understanding the terrible risk, Miranda and her parents decided to go ahead.

Her recovery was almost miraculous. As she was being wheeled from surgery, she opened her eyes and spoke to her parents. We could hardly believe it. We didn't know if she would wake up, if she would be able to move both sides of her body, or if she would be able to speak. She recovered with few side effects. I have performed 22 hemispherectomies with one death. I still feel badly about the death. Ninety-five percent of the patients are free from seizures.

There isn't space to discuss some of your other interesting and controversial surgeries. But tell us a little about the Siamese twins.

I had been giving some thought to using hypothermic arrest in especially difficult situations. When the Binders contacted us and, after careful study, several of us doctors agreed that it should be possible to separate the boys and retain good neurological function in each baby, we decided that was the procedure that would make it possible.

Dr. Mark Rogers coordinated a team of 70 people who participated in the surgery. We spent five months preparing for it. We actually had five 3-hour dress rehearsals using life-size dolls attached at the head with Velcro. And, I should add, I never go into a surgery without prayer.

To what do you attribute your success?

I have been greatly blessed. In a highly competitive field, I have been able to do surgeries that men of retirement age have not been privileged to do. I have performed operations that surgeons would give their right arms—so to speak—to do.

I believe there is only one reason. In everything I do, I strive to give God the credit. If I ever start thinking that I am the great Ben Carson, if I ever start thinking that there is something extra special about me, then I will be of little value to anyone. Standing at the sink, scrubbing before an operation, my thoughts always turn to God. I always pray. I don't make a big thing about it with my patients, but I am known as a Christian. God has helped my every step of my life.

Tell us about THINK BIG.

I have a burden for today's kids, especially minority kids. Look at the media. What kind of role models do they have? Sports stars and rock stars. But even if someone is absolutely wonderful, what are the odds that he'll make it big? One in 100,000, maybe.

Way back when I was recruiting students for Yale, I made a commitment to encourage young people. Today I tell kids practical ways to set goals for themselves. To succeed, they must spend some heavy time with books and in self-improvement. A lot of young people are so naive. "I'm going to be a doctor," they'll say, "or a lawyer." But they have no idea what specific steps are necessary for them to reach that goal.

THINK BIG is an acronym for: talent and time, hope and honesty, insight, being nice, knowledge, books, in-depth learning, and God. I explain how those few things are the keys to success.

I used to have time to speak to different youth groups. Now, more and more, schools and organizations are bringing the kids to Hopkins to me. I tell them how to set goals, how to avoid drugs and other harmful habits, how to rise above bad family situations, and how to use their God-given abilities to be the best they can be. One of the most gratifying things that happens to me is hearing that this or that young person has been changed by my example.

And your family?

Candy graduated from Yale and has her master's degree in business. She is also an accomplished violinist. Now and then I'm asked to tell my story in different places. Candy and my boys always travel with me. I am determined that my sons will know me. Not just a picture of me.

Penny Estes Wheeler

Penny Wheeler, acquisitions editor at the Review and Herald Publishing Association, was the editor on Dr. Carson's autobiography, Gifted Hands (Review and Herald, 1990). As part of her research while editing the manuscript, she was privileged to look over Dr. Carson's shoulder as he performed two surgeries.