

# NYU's 'man with golden hands' fixes damaged faces — and broken hearts

Dentistry pioneer Super is world-renowned oral, maxillofacial surgeon

BY JOAN DIM

**T**HINK WHAT it would be like to look in the mirror and hate what you see. Think what it would be like to have a hole in your face, or locked jaws so that you could not eat, or an asymmetrical upper and lower jaw that made you look perpetually angry.

Think what it would be like to be so ashamed of a facial deformity that you never left your house.

Dr. Stuart Super, a world-renowned oral and maxillofacial surgeon at New York University's College of Dentistry and a pioneer in his field who is known affectionately by many of his patients as "The Man with the Golden Hands," has spent the last 25 years repairing nature's terrible shortcomings and in giving people, often for the first time, a chance to lead a normal life.

Dr. Super has operated on more than 1,000 patients, and each one has a worthy story. But one patient, an extremely bright but very sad young woman from Brooklyn's Crown Heights, is particularly memorable.

Ladeeta Smith's path to Super's office at the College of Dentistry was circuitous. In 1993, Smith, then 18, was profiled in a *New York Times* story that described her agony as she faced the death of her mother from AIDS. The story touched the heart of



Ladeeta Smith and Dr. Stuart Super

President Bill Clinton, who personally handwrote Smith a letter advising her to get a good education and to make a good life for herself.

What the President didn't know was that in addition to Smith's family tragedy, she suffered from a severe facial deformity caused by a misshapen jaw, a deformity that occurs in approximately one out of 250 births. A friend, aware of Smith's physical calamity and of Dr. Super's expertise, arranged a meeting between doctor and patient.

Super was deeply moved by the young woman's plight, her keen intelligence, and, above all, her courage in moving forward with her life. Smith was just about to graduate from high school and was planning to attend Clark Atlanta University in Atlanta, Georgia.

"All my life I despised the way my teeth and mouth affected my

looks and self-esteem," said Smith. "I was made fun of, laughed at, and embarrassed for as long as I can remember."

It's not unusual for people with facial deformities to never want to leave the safe harbor of their homes, said Super.

"Often people suffering from such deformities can't talk or eat," he said, "and they are unfairly judged mentally deficient. The fact is that corrective surgery of the face becomes a tremendous catalyst for change. Once patients have had it, their entire demeanor changes."

Super told Smith that when she was ready he would perform her surgery. Because of her unique circumstances, the doctor volunteered his services. Smith, not quite ready for surgery, bravely went off to college. Once there, however, she was miserable.

"At college, I stayed inside be-

cause I was afraid of bringing attention to myself," she said. "No one understood why I was reluctant to participate in any activities . . . It was hard to explain how walking with my head down became a way of life."

Finally, after one semester at college, Ladeeta Smith came to a momentous decision to have her surgery.

Dr. Super began the metamorphosis by making a digitalized cephalogram — an x-ray — of Smith's skull, which was linked to the video on an IBM personal computer. Then the cephalogram was analyzed. A computer literally showed how bones of the jaw might be moved and then offered up three possible corrective treatment plans. Importantly, state-of-the-art video imaging allowed Smith to realistically assess before surgery what she would like like after surgery.

"When performing Ladeeta's surgery," said Super, "we moved the upper part of her face and the lower part of her jaw and chin in different directions to bring her features into harmony."

The result was remarkable. The change in Ladeeta Smith was swift. In three months her jaw and teeth were normal. Looking at her today, no one would guess her history.

Smith is now back in Atlanta. In a recent letter to Dr. Super, she summed up what the surgery has meant to her.

"I find myself doing and wanting to do the very things I couldn't or was ashamed of doing before," she wrote. "There are very few words in the English language with which I can fully express my appreciation and gratitude for all you have done. . . I thank you with all the strength of my heart, soul, and mind embody."