

THE ART OF DOING GOOD

BY ANTHONY MICHAEL



Defying expectations is the high bar that Dr. Keith Durante sets for the professional and personal dimensions of his life. He is a highly trained, board-certified general surgeon, with over 25 years' experience in general and micro-vascular surgeries. He has parlayed his exceptional skill and expertise into a different medical discipline: helping the who's who of New York manage their hair loss through cutting-edge therapies.

"I love my work, and I love helping people. So, for single-hair transplantation, who better to get it right than someone who's used to working on the smallest of spider veins?" offers Dr. Durante.

It's the love of helping people that is the philanthropic yin to Dr. Durante's medical yang. Unlike many, Dr. Durante's work is beyond inspired. After his daughter Elizabeth, an aspiring doctor, was tragically killed in a car accident on her way to a humanitarian mission in Uganda, Dr. Durante made it his mission to understand the work of Liz and eventually travelled to Uganda himself.

From that trip, Project Liz was born.

"I felt it was my obligation to continue the work she had started," says Dr. Durante. When he began the work in rural Uganda, he built a clinic from generous donations in Liz's honor. Yet the clinic wasn't comparable to a hospital. It wasn't equipped to treat very sick children let alone perform surgery. He knew that a child would die if a serious emergency presented.

In the town of Bwindi, near the Virunga Mountain Range, Dr. Durante discovered a hospital that needed a surgeon, and he quickly found it to be a new home. "I started going as often as I could, because it was there I realized that I could perform surgeries and serve the community the best," he says. Dr. Durante also believes it was no coincidence that the silverback gorillas he had studied in college made their home there, too. "Funny how things circle back," he says.

Over the years, Dr. Durante has trekked so many times for the silverbacks that locals think he's a veterinarian, and the gorillas have actually gotten to know him, too.

His trips to Uganda also gave Dr. Durante the opportunity to get to know the local culture and start to develop a plan to have as much impact as possible on those in the area with the greatest need, particularly the mountain Pygmies. It didn't take him long to understand where the energy and resources needed to be directed.

He started an offshoot organization: Project Liz — the Mountain Pygmy Project. Its mission is to assist the nomadic, marginal-

ized, voiceless mountain Pygmies and provide them with basic economic stability.

"They are exceptional artisans, so we opened a thrift store through which they can sell their own crafts, and have the opportunity to farm," says Dr. Durante, adding that they are even trying to attend local schools.

Additionally, Dr. Durante has helped found The Project Liz School for the Arts, through which children are learning how to make sculptures in honor of some of the famous gorillas of the area. Many of the sculptures are now at the local hospital, hotels, and elsewhere.

"My daughter Elizabeth sowed the seeds for me to continue the work that she had started, and the meaning that it brings to my life is immeasurable," says Dr. Durante. "It is in giving that we truly receive."

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Keith R. Durante, M.D., F.A.C.S.
521 Park Avenue, Manhattan
786 Montauk Highway, West Islip
drkeithdurante.com
@drkeithdurante
631.620.2020