

# Unfallen hero is raising burn injury awareness

BY KENDRA Y. MIMS

Although ASPS honors its Patients of Courage: Triumph Over Adversity award winners each year at Plastic Surgery The Meeting, there are more patients of courage than are recognized on stage.

Firefighter Marvin Benton sustained burns on more than 30 percent of his body on April 5, 1993, when a burning house collapsed on him. Over the next two years, Benton underwent eight operations to restore hand function, remove unsightly and painful keloids scars and reconstruct both ears with rib cartilage. ASPS member Gene Sloan, MD, Little Rock, Ark., performed Benton's first reconstructive procedure in 1995 – and he still sees him twice a year for follow-up care designed to monitor progress and take care of minor wound breakdowns as they occur.

Today, Benton educates students and teachers about fire prevention and safety, and he's recently published an inspirational book about his life. Both Benton and Dr. Sloan shared their thoughts on his journey and recovery process with PSN.

**PSN: How did your burn injury in 1993 affect your career as a firefighter?**

**Marvin Benton:** My injury unfortunately ended my career as a firefighter. I was told that because I could no longer fight fires, I could not remain on the force. I had to find a new life direction and was forced to develop other skills to support my family.

**PSN: Can you tell us about your work to educate the public on the importance of fire prevention?**

**Marvin Benton:** I worked as a fire-prevention educator for three years with the fire department as a civilian after I was able to return to work (two years of being off work due to my injuries). I spent the majority of this time in public schools, educating the students and teachers on fire prevention and safety.

**PSN: What role would you say Dr. Sloan played in your recovery process?**

**Marvin Benton:** I have tremendous respect for Dr. Sloan – he was there when I physically needed him the most. He's responsible for



Marvin Benton poses (left) with the suit he was wearing in April 1993 when a burning house collapsed on him and (above) with ASPS member Gene Sloan, MD, who helped Marvin's recovery.



restoring my overall general appearance. The incident left me without ears, and Dr. Sloan took cartilage from my ribs to rebuild my ears. He's also the reason I can use my hands and fingers to function normally. Without his medical expertise, I wouldn't be able to live the life I now live.

Because of reconstructive burn surgery, I'm not handicapped and dependent upon others. I also don't have a gruesome appearance that would cause people to stare in amazement when they see me. Yes, I have scars, but they are not readily noticeable. While Children's Hospital saved my life, Dr. Sloan gave me life by helping me to function and live as normal as possible.

**PSN: Faced with what you survived, other people might have wanted to give up. What made you want to keep going?**

**Marvin Benton:** I wanted to be there for my family. Besides, I have never been a quitter.

**PSN: Can you describe the inspiration behind your book, *Unfallen Heroes*?**

**Marvin Benton:** I wanted to pay homage to all unfallen heroes who are, many times, forgotten or disregarded. If one dies in the line of duty, the utmost respect is given, but when he/she lives, the response is different. We become a burden to the organization we served, instead of receiving the honor we deserved.

**PSN: What advice would you give to other burn patients?**

**Marvin Benton:** Bad things sometimes happen to good people. Don't let adversity deter you from your purpose in life. You still have a story of survival to tell others that can encourage them to make it just as you did. When people do notice my scars, they always want to know what happened to me. I use it as an opportunity to tell my story – and I emphasize that if I made it through all my struggles, so can others. **PSN**

## In Dr. Sloan's words

**PSN: What about Marvin's story do you find particularly inspiring?**

**Dr. Sloan:** His near-death experience, recovery, his reconstruction, his commitment to return to normal life, his community service, writing a book about his experience to inspire others and raising three accomplished daughters – a lawyer, PhD and nurse practitioner. He's just an amazing person.

**PSN: How has his story helped other patients seeking reconstructive surgery after a traumatic burn injury?**

**Dr. Sloan:** It demonstrates to others that even though we cannot erase all the scars from a burn injury, in many cases we can improve function and appearance enough so that patients can perform activities of daily living and feel accepted socially.

**PSN: Can you describe your experience working with Marvin and performing his procedures?**

**Dr. Sloan:** The degree of reconstruction was challenging and spanned many years. Marvin was always willing to do whatever possible to improve appearance and function both in terms of undergoing the surgical procedures and the rehabilitation to get a maximum result. As with any extensive reconstruction, setbacks will happen, but he never let any of this discourage him.

Our first meeting was a typical doctor-patient conversation, but it was clear that he was all-in from the beginning to do everything possible to get the best result. He always had a lot of questions, but he never doubted my commitment to him. His first procedure was in 1995, and I still see him once or twice a year to monitor for any issues.

**PSN: How has reconstructive surgery improved Marvin's quality of life?**

**Dr. Sloan:** After his life was saved by the burn unit at Arkansas Children's Hospital, Marvin realized he didn't just want to be a survivor – he wanted to live life to its fullest. He felt he had something to offer other

people internally, but that his physical appearance would cause others to judge him negatively. He also had some functional impairment of his hand. Over the next two years, he had eight operations to restore hand function, remove unsightly and painful keloids scars, and reconstruct both ears with rib cartilage. This gave him the confidence and ability to live a fully functional life without people looking upon him with pity, which was very important to Marvin.

Due to the extent of his burns, he was unable to return to work as a fireman, but he did return to the fire department to educate elementary school students about fire prevention. He has also been a fundraiser for the United Way, he obtained his college degree, he's worked as a supervisor in the city Public Works Department and he recently wrote an inspirational book about his life. He has volunteered at burn camp and spoken at juvenile detention centers. He regularly speaks at church and school events. He has been a mentor to many throughout his career. He's also worked as a community service coordinator – responsible for people working off fines and jail time. Marvin has inspired many of them to seek and get a second chance in life.

**PSN: Why did you nominate Marvin as a Patient of Courage?**

**Dr. Sloan:** I always knew Marvin as a "fireman who sustained a 30 percent BSA burn injury fighting a house fire." Upon reading his book, I learned how the burning house collapsed on him and left him trapped with no way out, and how he thought about his three daughters growing up without a father, before suddenly being overcome by a profound peace and comfort that he was about to rest in God's arms as his fire suit melted on his body. That really clarified just how close he came to death before he started his long road to recovery.

**PSN: If you could use one word to describe Marvin, what word would you choose?**

**Dr. Sloan:** Hero. **PSN**

## GCS eLearning module created by Patient Safety Subcommittee

Gender Confirmation Surgery (GCS) has become a highly sought-after procedure in recent years, as more patients seek physicians who can assist with their transition. With that in mind, a task force of the ASPS Patient Safety Subcommittee has created an eLearning module on GCS that's currently available on PSN.

This course is intended to give a basic overview of the best safety practices, help plastic surgeons become familiar with all pertinent medical terminology and provide an overview of complications and ways to mitigate these complications.

Course objectives include defining medical terms associated with gender confirmation surgery; identifying complications associated with gender confirmation surgery; identifying techniques to help mitigate gender confirmation surgery; and establishing patient safety techniques into one's practice.

Upon completion of the course, plastic surgeons will receive 1.0 Patient Safety Credits, and 1.0 AMA PRA Category 1 Credits™. For more information about the course, please contact ASPS Health Policy Analyst Marta Zielinski at [mzielinski@plasticsurgery.org](mailto:mzielinski@plasticsurgery.org). **PSN**