

AMAZING GRACE

STREET SMARTS

"I am one of five boys. All of my brothers had been shot, one of them six times. I was the only one who hadn't been. Guess I was waiting my turn," says Eric Gibson, a former South Central L.A. gang member who was recruited for violence and drug dealing at 13. In 1993, at age 25, his turn arrived in the form of a drive-by shooting that sprayed five bullets from a .357 Magnum into his body, leaving him bound to a wheelchair forever. "It was the best thing that ever happened to me," he says now. "I told the Lord in the ambulance that if he saved me, I would spend my life cleaning up the mess I'd made." And that's what he's done. After serving on the board of the National Spinal Cord Association for three years, Gibson was offered a grant in 2006 from the Christopher Reeves Foundation to speak to children in L.A. public schools. Now he takes time from his job as an executive sales rep at a medical supply company to wheel into fifth- through 12th-grade classrooms in underprivileged neighborhoods to talk straight dope with students about the tragic effects of gang life. "I'm fighting a war with very little ammo," he says of his quest to save kids. "I want to win."

Photographed by Dana Fineman

Meet four everyday Americans who faced formidable health challenges—and who chose to give back in ways that are nothing short of inspirational.

By WebMD Health Senior Editors
Kim Caviness and
Lauren Paige Kennedy

WORLD LEADER

Clare Rosenfeld, 20, juggles more than most juniors at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Ore. There's advocating on behalf of the U.N. Resolution on diabetes that she helped initiate (www.unitefordiabetes.org), staying on top of her pre-med double major in chemistry and international relations, and finishing classes in time to fly to South Africa in early December, where she'll lead the International Diabetes Federation's 19th World Congress Youth Leadership Workshop. She also maintains daily tight control of her type 1 diabetes, diagnosed when she was 7. "When I found out I had it, I was really scared. My mom said, 'We can get depressed, or we can do something about it.'" They chose the latter. Rosenfeld debuted as a group speaker three months later, served as the American Diabetes Association's first national youth advocate at 14, and, at 18, traveled to Third World countries to report on the devastating state of diabetes care. Diabetes strikes more than 230 million people worldwide today. "I consider this to be the critical health crisis of our [era]," Rosenfeld says. "In a way, I'm glad I have it. I'm at the right place, at the right time." Can diabetes be conquered? "Absolutely. I have a tremendous faith in medicine. My goal is that everyone who has diabetes now is alive when we get the cure."

Photographed by Robbie McClaran

Reviewed by WebMD Senior Medical Editor
Bruni Nazario, MD



THE DOCTOR IS OUT

Dr. Paul Villien is still engulfed in what he calls the “horror show” of Hurricane Katrina. The former medical director of the emergency room at Lindy Boggs Hospital—located off Canal Street and destroyed by flooding, losing 27 of its 150 stranded patients to stalled generators and dead ventilator machines—Villien now spends a lot of his time in his car. He drives nearly three hours from his home in New Orleans to a hospital in St. Francisville, works a 24-hour shift there, gets 12 hours off, and then drives two hours in the other direction to a hospital in New Iberia to repeat the process. “You do what you have to do to keep things moving along,” he says of his dedicated treks and of the locals who returned to rebuild and are in need of care from the few remaining medical facilities in the area. “It’s gonna take a long time to fix this broken city,” he says, his drawl slow and rueful. “The doctors and nurses who stayed during the crisis found their own homes destroyed, lost jobs due to closed hospitals that never reopened, and are now scattered all over the globe.” Lucky for Louisiana, a few like Villien held their ground.

Photographed by Rick Olivier

Photography by James Salzano



BEARING GIFTS

Cancer didn't scare Lindsay Nohr Beck. But the prospect of never becoming a mom did. Diagnosed in 1997 with throat cancer, Beck, then 22 and single, learned that the required chemotherapy treatments would render her infertile. "To me, getting married and having kids defined a successful life. I thought, 'Then, why bother? Why live?'" She worked the phones and finally found a Bay Area medical center willing, for \$15,000, to try the experimental process of freezing unfertilized eggs. She borrowed the money from her parents, banked 29 eggs, and two days later began chemo. Born from Beck's battle is Fertile Hope, a nonprofit she founded in 2001 to offer monetary assistance, resources, and support to cancer patients seeking to preserve fertility. Today, her New York City-based operation has negotiated deep discounts with sperm banks and 75 reproductive centers across the nation, and is raising grant money for scientific research. As for her own maternal leanings, Beck met her husband two years after her second battle with cancer—in her lymph glands, at age 24. After multiple miscarriages and three rounds of in vitro fertilization, she gave birth to Paisley Jane Beck on June 1, 2006. "She is why life is worth living. She is why I wanted to survive," the new mother says. Miraculously, Beck is still fertile and her stored eggs remain untouched, but "they provide me with security, since I will go into menopause early because of the chemo. It's like car insurance. I hope I never get into an accident—but I'm glad it's there." ●

Photographed by James Salzano



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