

## **Keeping It All In the Family**

by Rona Scott

Surgical weight loss is no longer simply a procedure. It's a lifesaving industry that's grown from doing a handful of procedures each year to easily more than 100,000 done annually. It stands to reason this industry would have surgeons whose successes and accomplishments place them in the spotlight.

Two such surgeons, affectionately referred to as the Duke and the Prince of Bariatric Surgery, are Dr. Rafael F. Capella and Dr. Joseph F. Capella affiliated with the Hackensack University Medical Center in New Jersey.

This father and Son duo have built a thriving business in the New York Metropolitan area. When I first spoke with Dr. Rafael Capella, I was surprised to find that he was 70 years old. His soft voice, marked by a musical Colombian accent, reminded me of warm butter. In my mind's eye, I pictured him looking like a dapper young Ricky Ricardo (I know-wrong country-right accent). He was kind and humble; exactly the type of physician a morbidly obese person seeks out, someone who will treat them with kindness and dignity.

Pam Thomas, now 49, knew that Dr. Rafael was the surgeon for her when she pursued gastric bypass in 2000. She was fed up. Her health problems weren't out of control, but had begun the downward spiral so common in morbidly obese patients. She had a bad back with herniated discs. In addition, daily activities that many people take for granted had become increasingly difficult. Thomas says, "I became breathless if I climbed stairs or went to the mall. I couldn't bend over to tie my shoes, so I always wore slip on shoes. I couldn't shave my own legs or paint my toenails. Worst of all, I felt I wasn't respected. Surgery was my last chance at living a normal life."

Dr. Rafael Capella began performing the Gomez Transverse Gastroplasty in 1982. Shortly thereafter, he began performing the Vertical Banded Gastroplasty. Since 1989 he has done both the Vertical Banded Gastroplasty and Roux en Y Gastric Bypass. In recent years, he has added the Adjustable Lap Band to his practice. Since 1982, he has performed over 4,000 surgical weight loss procedures. According to Dr. Rafael, "Many years ago I began doing more and more bariatric surgery; it's the most rewarding thing. When you do a hernia the patient is happy and you never see them again. With bariatrics you're always connected. It made me a happier person and allowed me to enjoy my practice more. It was a natural transition to do bariatrics full-time."

Dr. Joseph, as he is called, got his first taste of wanting to be a physician when he was quite young. The physicians are referred to as Dr. Rafael and Dr. Joseph by patients and staff to cut down on the confusion of being in the office with two Dr. Capellas. Dr. Rafael tells of old home movies showing Dr. Joseph with a stethoscope when he was only 4 or 5 years old.

Initially, Dr. Rafael encouraged his son to pursue a specialty other than bariatrics, because bariatrics didn't have the best reputation at that time. Still, Dr. Joseph persevered and received a BA from Cornell University and an MD from the State University of New York, Downstate Medical Center. He completed a general surgery residency at St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital Center, Columbia University New York, NY. Dr. Joseph Capella is an assistant clinical professor of surgery at the University

Medical and Dental School of New Jersey. Upon completion of his general surgery residency, he went into practice with his father performing surgical weight loss procedures.

Pam Thomas worked with a few ladies who'd had weight loss surgery. She watched them closely and was pleased to see that it worked for them. As Thomas puts it, "I'd tried everything from psychiatrists to structured weight loss programs, and still my life revolved around what was available to eat. I finally thought if my co-workers can do it, so can I." She weighed 278 when she began her journey. She remembers, "I never looked in mirrors unless it was from the chin up. If I saw my reflection in a mirror, I'd turn around to see who it was. I thought it couldn't possibly be me. I was in an unhappy place. I was assertive but not in a positive way. I'd crack fat jokes about myself before someone else got the chance. Someone at work referred me to Dr. Rafael. I went to one of his information seminars and I knew immediately I was in the right place." Thomas had surgery in April 3, 2000 and lost 140 pounds in 9 months. "I knew there were risks and I know I was very fortunate to have good results." As is typical with most surgical weight loss patients, their feeling is that the potential benefits far outweigh the risks. The average patient has been well educated at a patient seminar and then further educated at support groups, pre-operative classes and via the internet.

After working with his father performing surgical weight loss procedures, Dr. Joseph recognized the need for further treatment for surgical weight loss patients. "They lost significant amounts of weight but were left to deal with excess skin that prevented them from experiencing the fullest degree of success possible." Dr. Joseph trained in plastic and reconstructive surgery at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. He now does approximately 400 plastic surgeries per year, primarily performing circumferential panniculectomies.

When asked if he enjoys working with his father he replied, "Oh yes, we work very well together. We work hard at what we do and when we are away from the practice we can leave it behind and be like any father and son." Dr. Rafael is married and has three children, two sons and a daughter. His other son is in business. When I asked what his daughter did, I couldn't help but laugh when he hesitated and began to tell me how smart and wonderful she was but didn't actually mention what she did. I let him off the hook by asking, "is she a housewife?" We laughed together and he replied, "Yes." He is obviously the very proud father of a gifted domestic engineer and two talented sons. Dr. Joseph only recently relinquished the position of being one of New York and New Jersey's most eligible bachelors. He married in September 2003. His wife is intrigued by bariatric and plastic surgery and has even observed procedures.

Pam Thomas' kids, Ashley and Matthew, think her transformation has been wonderful. "They see that I'm so much happier. My daughter and I can go shopping in the same stores now. My daughter and I wear the same size in tops and shoes." It hasn't all been easy, however. Thomas' husband left about a year after the surgery. "He wasn't supportive at all. There was no encouragement, no anything." Still, she has no regrets. "My bones aren't tired and hurting when I wake up in the morning. I am a bundle of energy. I jump up, I'm ready, I go to the gym, I buy shoes that tie, I wear high heels, I'm not out of breath and boots fit around my calf. A regular size towel fits around my body. I can shave my legs. When I lost 100 pounds, I had my waist length hair cut short like Halle Berry's and donated the hair to Locks of Love for children who lose their hair due to different illnesses. For years

I'd hidden behind my hair. I always felt that I wasn't respected. I had no self-control. Why couldn't I just stop eating? Now, men will hold the door for me. People take me more seriously. I also take myself more seriously. I have more self-confidence. When you feel respect for yourself, you radiate it outward and feel more connected with other people."

Life has fun new adventures for Thomas as well. "I've been seeing a wonderful gentleman named Sean for about a year. I LOVE riding on the back of his Harley. I never would have done that prior to weight loss surgery! He's so kind and supportive and understanding of my experience. He's been a tremendous part of the inspiration that motivated me to work hard for my success." In addition to Sean and her children, Pam's best friend Carol Hallman has been a constant source of support and encouragement. "She brought me to all my doctor appointments and scheduled my surgery. She seems to know when to call me and is always there when I need her - whether things are good or when I need a shoulder to cry on."

Fifteen months after having bariatric surgery with Dr. Rafael Capella, Pam Thomas had plastic surgery with Dr. Joseph Capella. It was the crowning accomplishment in her long and rewarding journey. Thomas laughs when she recalls a follow up visit with Dr. Joseph. After her exam, Dr. Joseph stepped into the hall and called out, "Dad, Dad! Come in here, you've got to see this!" Thomas says, "It was so obvious they were proud of each other and of me as well."

The whole Capella clan is proud of the doctors' decision to devote the majority of their practice to weight loss surgery patients. Dr. Rafael and Dr. Joseph say it is very gratifying to have patients appreciate them so much. "Society is beginning to see that this isn't just another diet. It's a permanent solution."

Pam Thomas has also thought about this a lot. "Even though I have had the Weight Loss Surgery, I wish I could have just put the fork down. I wish I could have successfully dieted. It was a lifelong problem for me. It wasn't something I took lightly. I tried for 20 years to fix it myself, and I still don't have an answer as to why I couldn't do it. It's not that easy. It's not simple to walk away from food... it's the same as someone who is addicted to alcohol or drugs. Dr. Rafael and Dr. Joseph gave me and others like me the option to be healthy. They gave me so much hope when, for so long, there was none."

If there ever was a place called Camelot within the surgical weight loss community it's a sure bet who could lead them. A duke called Dr. Rafael with a warm flowing Colombian accent and a prince named Dr. Joseph who's been following a dream of helping people since he was a 5 year-old boy.

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