

A Different Type of Hero, MEET DR. ALBERT FOX

Written by Chris Hassan | Photos provided by Dr. Fox, portrait opposite page by Lucki Schotz

Some children fantasize about becoming heroes when they grow up. They pretend to be cops, firefighters, and astronauts, but often outgrow these childhood dreams. Since the age of six, Dr. Albert Fox knew he wanted to make a difference in the medical field as a surgeon. His patients with facial deformities are no doubt grateful he followed through with his dreams. To their families, he will always be a hero.

This past October, Dr. Fox, a board-certified facial plastic surgeon, was one of several American doctors to travel to Linyi, China, as part of the humanitarian program Face to Face. The goal of the program, which is conducted under the auspices of the American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery, is to provide treatment to those with facial deformities, as well as to educate and inform surgeons around the world.

A graduate of Yale University and the University of Connecticut School of Medicine, Dr. Fox first became involved with Face to Face during his fellowship in facial plastic and reconstructive surgery at the University of Missouri. Through Face to Face's National Domestic Violence Project, Dr. Fox treated several victims of domestic abuse and experienced one of the most moving experiences of his life.

There was a 13-year-old boy who had been abused by both of his parents (thankfully, they

went to jail). The child had significant scars on his scalp and face and a nose that was literally crushed. Though the emotional scars would remain, the hope was that by restoring the nose's functionality and appearance, the child could begin to put the past behind him. Dr. Fox has been committed to the program ever since.

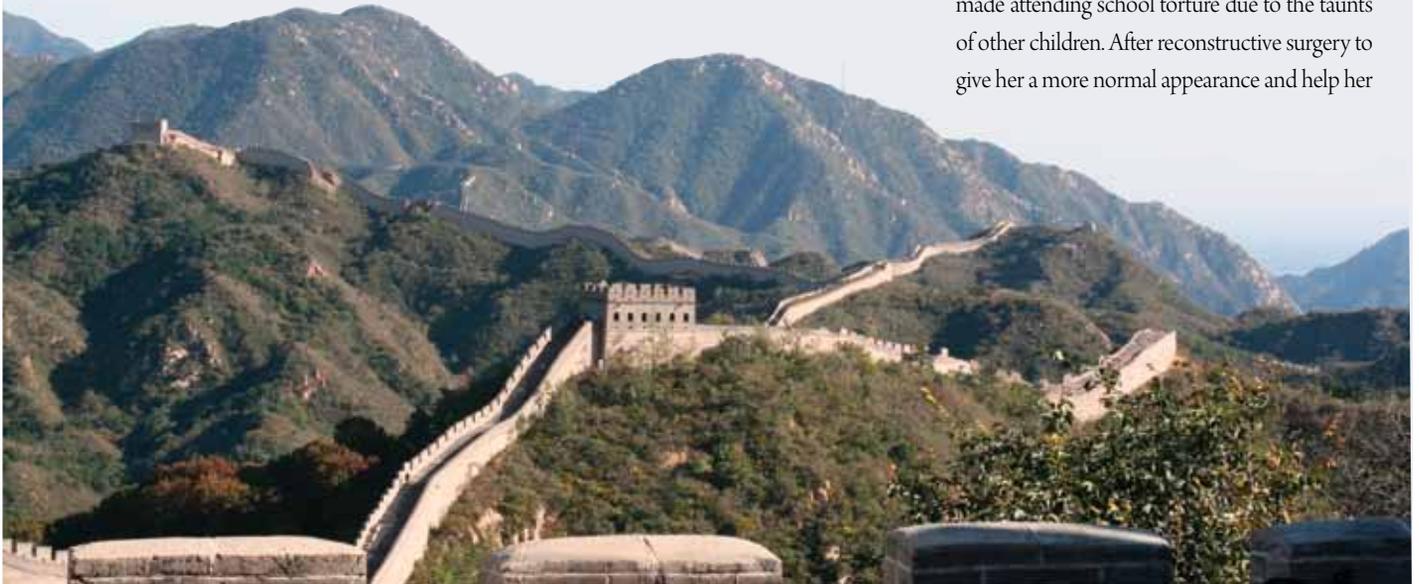
The flight to China was the first international Face to Face trip for Dr. Fox and a few of the other doctors. From October 9 to 19, the team was based in the developing city of Linyi, approximately 500 miles south of Beijing. "I always wanted to go," says Dr. Fox, "and I finally reached a point in my career where I felt I could go."

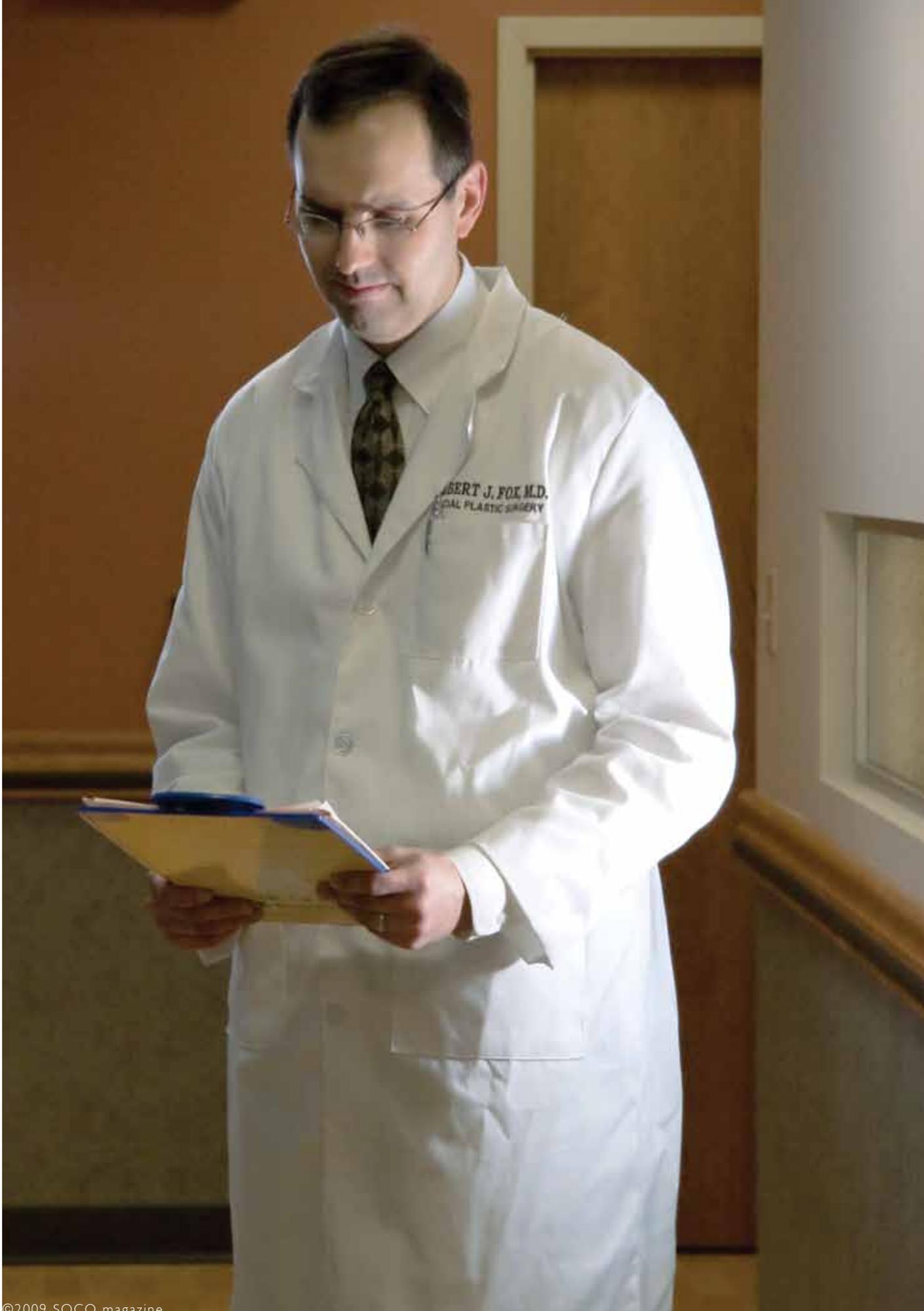
The People's Hospital of Linyi helped spread the word that the Face to Face team was coming, and Chinese citizens in need of help traveled from far and wide. The hospital itself is a 26-story facility that has been modernizing over the past decade. With modernization comes a need for greater knowledge and expertise, so mixed into the surgery schedule were two days of lecturing.

With so many in need of help, the doctors were forced to prioritize the patients in terms of age and the severity of their conditions. For Dr. Fox, turning people away was the hardest part of the trip. "You're there for a limited amount of time, and there's only so many surgeries you can get done," he says. "It's the hardest thing, knowing that on the day you're leaving, there are many more people you know who could use your help." But this unfortunate knowledge is also what inspires Dr. Fox and his colleagues to return to Linyi.

There were ten patients in total: three adults and seven children. Cleft lip and cleft palate were among the defects that needed correcting (they happen to be more common in Southeast Asian countries).

One of the most rewarding surgeries for Dr. Fox was for a 13-year-old girl, whose nasal alae were not attached to her face, giving her an unusual appearance. The girl's mother and father explained how this caused her to be very shy and made attending school torture due to the taunts of other children. After reconstructive surgery to give her a more normal appearance and help her





breathing, the girl's parents were ecstatic.

"They were so grateful we could do this for their child," Dr. Fox says with pride. "You receive rewards that are beyond describing in words."

The team did have translators, but the joy in a grateful parent's face doesn't need to be translated. Goodwill transcends language and culture.

"You have someone who comes to you; they put their trust in you to make a big change in their lives," says Dr. Fox. "One of the reasons I love surgery so much is seeing the joy it brings to people, knowing it's something that, through care and paying attention to detail, can make a huge difference in someone's life."

Dr. Fox stresses that reconstructive surgeries are performed in China, but the problem lies in the healthcare system. China is so vast, and the majority of the country is still rural and agrarian based, so get-

ting access to the needed care is a challenge. In the United States, a procedure like cleft lip repair takes place between five and six months of age. But Face to Face is dedicated to helping countries like China move in the right direction.

During surgery, Chinese doctors assist the one or two American surgeons, while others videotape or take photographs of the procedure for future analysis. It was very important for the surgeons to convey their knowledge, skills, and techniques. When translators weren't present, hand signals for items like scissors were necessary.

Conditions at the hospital were very good and the facility had basic operating room supplies. However, the surgeries would have been a bit more challenging if the American team had not brought along certain supplies. Surgical instruments and sutures proved invaluable. The team made sure to list the types of instruments the Chinese doctors should develop or purchase to help elevate their work to the next level.

One of the trip's few stressful moments came at the very beginning, when several pieces of luggage were misplaced on the flight over. These suitcases contained more than just clothing and shampoo; they carried several important surgical instruments and supplies. Luckily, they were found, and the rest of the trip was free of tense moments.

While treating the Chinese patients, Dr. Fox found the postoperative procedure and how active a role the patients' families played particularly inter-

esting. Since many of the patients came from so far away, their families stayed in the same rooms and were often involved in the post-op wound care.

Dr. John M. Hodges is another surgeon who has been on ten missions to Linyi since 1994. "Dr. Hodges said once you start doing something like this, you'll never want to turn back," notes Dr. Fox. "It's like you get bit by a bug." In addition, the nice thing about returning to a location repeatedly is seeing the changes and progress being made. "If you go to 50 different places, you may not leave a lasting impact," he adds.

Though he would like to visit a few other locations, Dr. Fox will definitely return to Linyi, hopefully with the same team members, who have become friends for life. "We were together for a brief but tense amount of time, with travel, surgery, and lecturing," the surgeon shares. "You develop strong bonds that are unforgettable."

The hospital has invited the team back to be part of a lecture set for April 2010, so Dr. Fox is optimistic that he'll see some of his patients again. Until that time, he will continue his plastic surgery practice stateside from his office in North Dartmouth, Mass.

A man with an appreciation for the complexity and beauty of the human face, Dr. Fox sought a way to use his expertise to help people both at home and abroad. Face to Face proved the perfect fit for the good doctor, who flew to China on his own dime. He hopes to organize a Face to Face fundraiser soon.

Dr. Fox stumbles a bit trying to find the right words to describe how rewarding it was to participate in the China trip. "It's just a feeling you get of personal joy, personal pride," and, after a brief pause, "a personal journey." ★

