

Doc Hollywood

Entertainer turned psychiatrist treats the rich & famous

While some physicians knew all along they'd practice family medicine or surgery, Dr. Richard Nandi Chenik knew he would provide care for celebrities. "I had dreamed of coming back here and being a Beverly Hills psychiatrist," he says. "I'm an entertainer at heart. Living in this town and doing what I do allows me to be an entertainer as well as a psychiatrist."

If you set aside the glamour and fame, Hollywood's rich and famous are much the same as people everywhere. They suffer from the same mental health problems that affect the rest of the population. But in Hollywood there's an added twist. Unlike actors and actresses, most of us don't live double lives, being one person in private and quite another in the public eye. As a Hollywood psychiatrist you allow for a degree of duplicity. "These people are who they are. But on the other hand, they're somebody else," Dr. Chenik says. "They are someone else who everybody in the world knows."

Medicine is the most recent career for Dr. Chenik. He has been a U.S. Marine, a comedian, an entertainer, a lawyer, and since 1994, an osteopathic physician and psychiatrist. Today he's still part comedian and entertainer. If

laughter is indeed the best medicine, he's in the right place.

This past October Dr. Chenik and his wife, Mara, co-chaired the 52nd Annual Thaliens Ball, the premier social and charity event in Hollywood. Actress Jayne Mansfield began the Thaliens Ball as a fund-raiser for Thaliens Mental Health Center of Hollywood's Cedars-Sinai Medical Center. The charity ball provided funding for the original building where the Thaliens Mental Health Center now stands at the corner of George Burns and Gracie Allen Drive. "It is our credibility and genuineness that extend and make us stand head and shoulders above anything else," Dr. Chenik says, noting that the Thaliens Ball is the oldest Hollywood mental health fund-raiser. In 2007 Dr. Chenik became the first person other than a Hollywood celebrity to host the event.

In contrast to his lifestyle today, Dr. Chenik grew up in Rudd, Iowa, a town of 408 in north central Iowa. As he talks of growing up in a farming community, the comedian in him can't resist the set-up: "It's difficult being Jewish, you know, we're not really supposed to farm," he says jokingly. After serving in the Marines Corps, Dr. Chenik attended several academic institutions in California. He

worked as an actor and stand-up comedian for a time. He earned a law degree and became a patent attorney. After that he attended medical school.

Dr. Chenik applied and was accepted to several medical schools in California, but ultimately he chose DMU. The college in Des Moines felt like family. In Iowa he developed a sense of proportions and common sense that he might not have received anywhere else. "I gained an understanding of where I was, what I was going to do," he says. "I was aware of my limitations as a physician—I think I learned a lot of those things in Des Moines. I also learned the importance of touching your patients. Something magical happens when you put your hands on people, even as a psychiatrist."

While in Des Moines Dr. Chenik met his wife, Mara, during a one-year rotating internship at Des Moines General Hospital. They met through a blind date at Jesse's Embers restaurant, which is just blocks from the campus. Dr. Chenik recalls that within the first half hour of their date, he

told Mara he was going to "come home" to Beverly Hills. (A note to 1994 COM graduates: Dr. Chenik says he's "putting the band back together" and encourages everyone to attend the 2008 Alumni Reunion.)

Along with maintaining a small private practice in Hollywood, Dr. Chenik has provided private contract services for death row inmates in the largest women's prison in the country—a humbling experience, he says, that gave him a chance to expand his skills.

Dr. Chenik is on the board of directors for the 2,800-bed Cedars-Sinai Medical Center and is involved with fund-raising events

in addition to the Thaliens Ball. Celebrities are part of the reason such events are so successful. "Celebrities bring a sense of credibility," Dr. Chenik says. "They've made

our issues tolerant and put psychiatry out on the table.

"Hollywood has always fed our passions and driven our dreams. We don't have princes. We don't have royalty. But we do have Hollywood." – DAVID KRAUSE

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