

# More than meets the eye

**Ophthalmologist, writer, philanthropist, triathlete, man of science, man of faith. For James P. Gills, one passion has never been enough.**

By John Barry, Times Staff Writer

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TARPON SPRINGS - The blue-masked man bends forward in his rolling chair, back stiff, eyes pressed to microscope. On his surgical table lies a woman wrapped in blue like a package, except for naked right eye, lid peeled back, pupil widely dilated, bathed in light. ¶ He is busy with two slender instruments. One obliterates a lens, opaque as butter. The other suctions out milky debris. He slips a tube into the same incision and deposits a folded thing that spreads like the wing of a moth. The folded thing becomes a clear lens. It all takes five minutes. The woman sees again. ¶ The blue man is on his feet, hobbling away on severely damaged legs. He stops in the hall for 10 sit-ups, still masked. Time for 10 more cataract surgeries, time to celebrate with patients, to praise the Lord, to sign book No. 27, to pet his Labrador retriever - even time to once more Indian-wrestle his old nemesis, Darwin. ¶ He is Christian guru, joke collector and Ironman Triathlon legend. He is millionaire philanthropist and West Virginia ol' boy. He is honored medical innovator who, among his colleagues in science, stands on the lonely nay side of evolution. ¶ What DNA composition produced James P. Gills, M.D., 72-year-old blue-masked cataract surgeon? ¶ "A question like that can't be answered," says Gills' son Pit, now his partner ophthalmologist. "Some people have a fire for life. That's just part of it."

James P. Gills built the ophthalmology clinic on U.S. 19 in Tarpon Springs that's about the size of a minor United Arab Emirates palace. It's the one with the electric billboard as big as a drive-in screen. He calls it St. Luke's. He gets there by bicycle every day. His usual ritual is to rise at 5, read the Bible aloud, read his joke books "a man's thing," his wife says, mystified, board bicycle and tear down the Pinellas Trail, arriving at work in shorts and helmet.

He used to run to work. He no longer can.

It's one of those stories his wife, Heather, tells with a wince. About 10 years ago, Jim broke his leg in a cycling accident. It was a terrible fracture, required three surgeries. The leg had to be lengthened 3 inches. Then he flung himself into physical therapy with such intensity that the bone couldn't heal properly. It was excruciating.

Says Heather, "He doesn't feel pain like you or I."

Back on his feet, Jim was on marital probation when they went skiing in Colorado. "Don't do anything crazy," Heather begged. He skied safely, the first day.

Then a buddy showed up, the two men charged to the slopes, and "pronto, he broke the other leg."

Heather cried when they brought him down.

They've been together 45 years. Fractures have left Jim 3 1/2 inches shorter than he was when Heather fell in love with her lifeguard on Myrtle Beach, S.C., and married him.

Headlong is how it has always been.

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In Gills' operating rooms, the miracle of sight happens quicker than a tire change. Come on in, take your clothes off, lie down, open that eye, look at the blue man, zap, zap, sight restored.

He has been doing that for 40 years. It's never been quite enough. He applied for three medical patents this year and published his 27th book, *Exceeding Gratitude for the Creator's Plan*. It references Darwin, Jesus, Einstein and John the Baptist. He prints 40,000 books a month and sends them to 2,000 jails and prisons. He's the most popular author on death row.

He has endowed four medical chairs. He has helped build 2,500 churches. He won the 2007 Distinguished Medical Alumnus Award from his alma mater, Johns Hopkins University. He no longer runs marathons (27) or Ironmans (5) - he owns the Ironman franchise, by the way - or Double Irons (6), but cycles 7 miles on his bent legs to work.

It's still not quite enough. There's a hesitancy as he lists his accomplishments. There's always that hesitancy.

In his latest book, Gills recalls his medical studies at Duke in 1965, the same year Sir John Eccles won the Nobel Prize in medicine for his work on the cell and what's called its electrophysiological transmembrane potential.

Gills, the student, marveled over the miracle of living cells and electricity. He made a tiny instrument called a nanopipette to measure electrical potentials across a cell membrane. He found electrical fields generated by the cells at times larger than the electrical fields found near power lines.

From his book, *Exceeding Gratitude for the Creator's Plan*: "As I gazed at the phenomenal activity of life produced by the hundreds of functioning entities within one microscopic living

cell, and its ability to integrate perfectly with more than 60-million other cells of the human body, my ingrained philosophy of evolution was jolted."

The student dared to see himself as a university researcher, peering into the origins of life - a Sir James who one day might challenge Darwin.

Instead, Gills became an ophthalmologist.

"I never thought I'd practice medicine," he says. "I thought it was a downgrade."

But clinical work pushed aside those dreams at Duke. "It just didn't work out."

He'll never win a Nobel. But he gives people sight.

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These random thoughts from James P. Gills: We breathe about 630-million times over an average lifetime. The average speed of a sneeze is 68 mph. The skin has a surface area of more than 2 square yards. The human body is composed of 10,000-trillion atoms - more than the stars of the universe. We make 2-million red blood cells every second. We have 9,000 taste buds.

He was born that way. His grandmother memorized the New Testament. He likes to accumulate ideas, take them apart, down to the molecule, use the pieces to prove his faith. To prove God's existence, he hauls out quantum physics. "Absorbed with great ideas and minds," his wife says.

The cells of the retina - rods for dim and peripheral vision, and cones for color and fine detail perception - translate light photons into electrical impulses for the brain. . . . (It) would take a Cray supercomputer 100 years to simulate what is occurring in the eye every second.

It had to have taken God's design, not evolution, to accomplish such "flawless form and function," Gills argues. He doesn't just believe in a creator. He tries to prove it.

That's a misread of Gills, says his close friend Chuck Colson, the former political aide to Richard Nixon, who served seven months in prison because of Watergate. After his sentence, Colson went on to found the Prison Fellowship, a national Christian ministry. He and Gills have visited prisons all over the country. Gills fixed Mrs. Colson's cataracts (as well as Billy Graham's).

By telephone from Virginia, Colson asserts that Gills believes what he believes because he's a Christian. He has faith. Period. He's a genius, but he doesn't have to prove anything.

Heather Gills points out that Colson is a lawyer, and her husband is a scientist.

"God has given Chuck a different kind of mind than my husband."

Her husband, she says, has faith, but he does look for proof of God's hand in creation. "He examines the evidence," she says. "I don't know if it's a backup for his faith or not."

"Many great minds come to God. God meets us all where we are."

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In two early doorstep-sized novels, Gills created a fictional character whose obsession with career led to the neglect of his marriage. The hero didn't wake up until he was slapped with divorce papers.

"Some people thought Jim was being autobiographical," Heather says.

"I don't think so."

The early years weren't easy. When they started his practice, first in New Port Richey, he flew by the seat of his surgical scrubs. She was his business partner. She knew the risks he was taking.

"Cataract patients used to stay in the hospital for days," she says. "He figured out that patients didn't need to be hospitalized. (Now patients routinely go home just 30 minutes after surgery.) He also figured out that the whole eye didn't need to be deadened. All you needed was a drop on the eye's surface."

"But when you're in a lawsuit, the first question a lawyer asks you is 'Is this standard practice?' And with my husband, the answer was always 'No.' "

Every day was a gamble.

Work did consume him. "The thought of not achieving was devastating to him."

The marriage did suffer. "Over 45 years, you can imagine," she says softly. "Our angels have been busy."

She has lived with a man who appreciates an uneven pair of legs, she says. They are proof of a life fully lived.

She laughs, tells a story.

A hurricane was coming. Neighbors were evacuating. Jim says to his kids, "Looks like pretty good weather to put the Hobie Cat in."

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In the early '90s, the couple gave the University of South Florida \$1.2-million to create the James P. and Heather Gills Chair in Ophthalmology. Gills recommended cornea surgeon James Rowsey, fellow West Virginian and Christian, to be the first chairman.

"A wonderful man," Gills now says, "but it was a mistake."

By the late '90s, the state of Florida had paid more than \$600,000 to settle lawsuits brought by three professors who said Rowsey had ruined their careers because they didn't share his Christian beliefs.

Gills gave Rowsey a job at St. Luke's. He dedicated a book to him. He also hired one of the USF professors, a Catholic, who'd just sued Rowsey.

Both were good hires, he says. He just had to keep them apart.

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Early this year, Johns Hopkins University presented him with the 2007 Distinguished Medical Alumnus Award. Previous recipients have included Nobel winners.

On the Friday night he was flying to Baltimore for the award ceremony, he passed Lorna Potter, his billing clerk, in the employee parking lot.

He said, "Have a nice weekend."

The clerk answered, "I wish I could."

He stopped.

"Problems?"

She said her 16-year-old daughter, Megan, was using drugs. She'd been arrested for theft.

"Is she getting counseling?" Gills asked.

"I can't afford it. I'm a single mom."

"That's a shame," he said. "That shouldn't be."

Gills said good night and went off to get his award.

When Potter got into work on Monday, she was called by Teen Challenge, a residential drug treatment program for teenagers. Megan had been accepted for a 15-month program. Gills would pick up the bill.

Potter began to cry, telling the story.

As she spoke, she wiped her eyes to see.