

Surgeon's Brush With Law Changes His Life, Career

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April 10, 2001 | By JOHN W. ALLMAN Staff Writer and The Los Angeles Times contributed to this report.

The hand wavers before the slender knob.

He stands there, waiting, until the door opens from the inside. Dr. Angelo E. Gousse offers a limp shake, his fingers barely extending past a thick, cumbersome brace that protects his hand and wrist.

It is an awkward moment, one of many for Gousse, who says he can no longer do simple things such as turn a door knob, steer a car or hold his daughter.

Born in Haiti and educated at Yale University, Gousse built a national reputation as a leading expert in female urological disorders. With his hands, he performed delicate, precise surgical procedures that some patients say changed their lives.

But that was before Feb. 11, before the handcuffs were applied and left on by Los Angeles police officers, before the pain set in, before his life changed.

Gousse, an assistant professor at the University of Miami School of Medicine's Department of Urology, has accused the LAPD of wrongfully stopping his rental car because of his race. He alleges the restraints damaged the nerves in his wrists that allowed his hands to function.

A civil suit against the city and its police department is likely. But legal action cannot restore the use of his hands.

The nerves might repair themselves. They might not. No doctor can tell him for sure. He is on medical leave from the university and undergoing therapy.

Such uncertainty about his future punctuates every sentence.

"It was a great life," says the surgeon, who is 37 years old. "I had a great life."

Delicate handiwork

Gousse, who lives in Miramar with his wife, Marie-May, and two children, Stanley, 10, and Angelica, 5, came to the United States with a dream of helping others.

Born in Port-Au-Prince, Haiti, he grew up watching his physician father, Ange-Marie Gousse, delight in helping patients. His father specialized in infectious diseases and, before his death at age 51, worked as a hospital administrator.

"He did inspire me, very much so," Gousse said.

By his senior year of high school, the decision was made. Gousse traveled to New York to study at City University of New York, York College campus. He graduated valedictorian and received the prestigious Dr. Jonas E. Salk Scholarship, which helped him attend the Yale University School of Medicine.

His fascination with urological disorders began there. He focused on bladder dysfunction, and his research has garnered him acclaim as an expert in the area of female incontinence, the inability to control urinary function.

He was the first in South Florida to perform a rare procedure, implanting a device to regulate bladder function.

In 1998, following a six-year medical residency in Houston, Gousse was hired by the University of Miami School of Medicine. In addition to seeing patients, he worked until February with residents and medical students at Jackson Memorial Hospital.

It was his easygoing demeanor and ever-present smile, patients said, that developed him a loyal following.

"He is a phenomenal human being," said Marie Minervini, 73, of Miami Beach. "He has compassion. He has love. He knows his business."

Minervini is one of the dozens of former patients who sent Gousse letters and cards after hearing about his injury.

"I didn't sleep for two nights thinking about him. I was so sick to my stomach thinking about what happened to him," said another patient, Marlene Kerstein of Coconut Creek, who went to see Gousse for pelvic pain in 1999.

Kerstein, 49, has kept in touch with Gousse since her surgery, writing him letters to express her gratitude at his curing her pain.

"He's just very kind to all his patients," she said. "That's what makes this more unbelievable. Here he is helping so many people, and then he gets hurt."

Conflict in Los Angeles

In February, Gousse went to Los Angeles to participate in a conference at the UCLA Medical Center.

He was driving back to his hotel when police stopped his 2000 Ford Taurus rental car. Gousse's lawyers have said Gousse was forced to the ground and handcuffed as multiple police cars arrived and a helicopter hovered overhead. He was taken to the Rampart Division station, west of downtown Los Angeles, and remained handcuffed until he complained of pain in his hands, they said.

On March 27, Gousse filed a claim against the city of Los Angeles and its police force. The city has until early May to respond.

Gousse has retained two lawyers in Fort Lauderdale, Sheldon J. Schlesinger and Robert W. Kelley, and attorney Browne Greene in Santa Monica, Calif.

Because of the pending legal action, Gousse cannot comment beyond the court documents about what happened that night.

His claim alleges officers wrongfully stopped his rental car on a Santa Monica freeway because he is a black man, that they ignored his repeated assertions that he is a doctor and had done nothing wrong; and that they improperly applied the handcuffs, which damaged his hands and possibly ended his career.