

Finding the Spirit of New Orleans

An ophthalmologist learns much more than surgical tips at the 2007 AAO Annual Meeting.

BY GILLIAN McDERMOTT, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

If you ask Thomas McCauley, MD, this story is not about him. It is about honesty and integrity, gratitude and reward. It is a story about a city and its inhabitants, devastated by a hurricane but working hard to make a comeback.

A WALLET

Dr. McCauley felt anxious about attending the 2007 AAO Annual Meeting in New Orleans. He had heard tales of rampant crime there unpunished. The AAO, however, was offering ophthalmologists the opportunity to work with the New Orleans Area Habitat for Humanity prior to the meeting—a bonus to the usual draw of the meeting.

He decided to attend accompanied by one of his technicians, Steven Carlson, who is also a carpenter of impressive size. They rented a car in New Orleans so that they would not have to walk the city's streets. In addition, Dr. McCauley followed friends' advice and separated his cash from his identification and credit cards. With his money in a wallet and his cards in a pouch, he knew he could still return home if the former were stolen.

That is exactly what he thought had happened when he realized his wallet was missing on Thursday, November 8. After winning at the gaming tables at Harrah's New Orleans, Dr. McCauley and Mr. Carlson enjoyed a buffet dinner. Their service was so good that the ophthalmologist completed a manager's compliment card to praise their waiter, Al Castro. They then attended a show in the casino. As the music played, Dr. McCauley stood up in a panic and began patting the pockets of his jacket, shirt, and pants.

"Steve thought I was doing some version of the Macarena," Dr. McCauley said in an interview with *Cataract & Refractive Surgery Today*. "I immediately thought that my pocket had been picked, but Steve said, 'Honestly, Dr. McCauley, no one has come near you.'"



Figure 1. Thomas McCauley, MD, and Al Castro pose with the wallet that initiated their journey into the media spotlight. (Photo by Michael DeMocker ©2007 The Times-Picayune Publishing Co., all rights reserved. Used with permission of *The Times-Picayune*.)

The pair retraced their steps to the buffet only to find that Mr. Castro had retrieved Dr. McCauley's name from the manager's compliment card and had already called the hotel looking for him.

"He handed the wallet to me and said, 'It's all there,'" Dr. McCauley recalled. "I did not have to count the money. Looking at him, I knew every cent was there. I was amazed. Here I was in the crime capital of the US getting a wallet back with \$8,000 cash [in it but] without an I.D."

Mr. Castro refused to accept a finder's fee, so Dr. McCauley placed an additional \$100 tip on the table and informed Mr. Castro's direct supervisors of what had happened.

"Essentially, they gave him a pat on the back," Dr. McCauley said.

A REWARD

Dr. McCauley decided that Mr. Castro's honesty merited a reward. He contacted Harrah's Entertainment (Las Vegas, NV) to let the corporate office know of his experience. Those with whom he spoke agreed that Mr. Castro deserved special recognition. According to Dr. McCauley, Harrah's representatives also realized that positive press would be good for New Orleans.

"The few people who get all the bad publicity don't represent the vast majority of people who do a great job," he said. "When Al Castro showed up for work at 3:30 PM the next day, to his amazement, there were TV cameras and newspaper journalists there to get the story" (Figure 1).

That night, Dr. McCauley went out to dinner with Mr. Castro and his wife, Maria. He wanted to get to know them. He learned that Mr. Castro had been working for the hotel industry in New Orleans when Hurricane Katrina hit. He had lost his job and was on the brink of bankruptcy, but he and his family were too proud to accept government subsidies. They worked their way back. In November 2007, Mr. Castro was a full-time waiter at New Orleans Harrah's and a full-time student of accounting at the University of Phoenix.

Dr. McCauley stated that, upon arriving home after returning the wallet, Mr. Castro had told his wife what he

had done. Her reaction was one of support and pride.

"His wife believes in karma and [maintains that] good things happen to people who do good things," Dr. McCauley said.

Their dinner together showed Dr. McCauley that Mr. Castro was highly motivated, soft-spoken, and honest. The ophthalmologist took the weekend to think over what he wanted to do. He had heard that there was to be a ceremony at the convention center on Monday, November 12, to honor Mr. Castro. The event was being organized by several people, including public officials and the superintendent of police as well as representatives from the hotel and convention center consortiums, Harrah's, and the mayor's office.

To Dr. McCauley, the second-best gift is anonymous and unsolicited. The best gift, he believes, makes the recipient self-reliant and allows him to give to others. Dr. McCauley hoped to spark the spirit of giving in others. At the ceremony honoring Mr. Castro, Dr. McCauley gave him the wallet containing \$8,000 to help pay for his tuition. Harrah's Entertainment and the University of Phoenix, he said, have since paid for Mr. Castro's tuition, books, and fees.

A REACTION

Dr. McCauley's office has been overwhelmed with calls from Rhode Islanders who wish to donate their time and money to Al Castro and the city of New Orleans. The ophthalmologist has also received (and thus far declined) invitations to appear on numerous talk shows and news programs.

He cannot believe that the incident has received so much press, and he feels some guilt over it. Dr. McCauley noted that other ophthalmologists he knows donate 4 to 6 weeks of their time per year and risk their lives to treat people in unsafe parts of the world for little or no recognition. This story, he said, is not about him.

"It's about Al Castro and people like him," Dr. McCauley asserted. "It's about the city of New Orleans." ■

Readers interested in volunteering may contact the New Orleans Area Habitat for Humanity at (504) 861-4121 or visit the organization's Web site at <http://www.habitat-nola.org>. Those who wish to make a monetary contribution are asked to direct donations to the Boys and Girls Club of America, Southeast Louisiana, by calling (504) 566-0707 or visiting the organization's Web site at <http://www.bgcseala.org>.

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