

Dr. Kimberly Lee of Beverly Hills Facial Plastic Surgery Center: 5 Things You Need To Create A Successful Career As A Plastic Surgeon

Luke Kervin | July 4, 2022



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As part of my series about healthcare leaders, I had the distinct pleasure of interviewing **Dr. Kimberly J. Lee.**

Beverly Hills-based, Dr. Kimberly J. Lee, is a Board-Certified Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeon, the residing director of Beverly Hills Facial Plastic Surgery Center, and one of the best kept secrets among Hollywood A-listers. Regarded as one of the top female facial plastic surgeons in Los Angeles, Dr. Lee's surgical expertise lies in her ability to achieve the most natural results with a focus on facial rejuvenation. Dr. Lee graduated from Stanford University with Honors and academic distinction, and was one of only 86 accomplished students accepted into the prestigious Stanford University School of Medicine, where she received her MD degree. Known for her dexterity, Dr. Lee found her passion in facial plastic surgery during a research year doing head and neck surgery. In 2008, as the Chief Resident of Surgery, Dr. Lee was the lead surgeon on the case of the woman who was mauled by a bear in Kern County, putting her and the complex case at the forefront of the media.

Thank you so much for joining us in this interview series! Can you share the most interesting story that happened to you since you started your career?

There are so many I could write a book about my experiences! In terms of interesting cases, I had a unique situation where a patient was mauled in the face by a bear and airlifted to UCLA, where I did her surgery. While there's no textbook or course on how to fix a face after a bear mauling, it was going back to my childhood of being creative and using my hands to extrapolate from what I had learned to put the face back together again. Almost right after this incident, I was called into the ER for a patient who had a nail in the hard palate of his mouth. He was a construction worker and here I was thinking it's a nail used to put up a picture on the wall. When I came into the hospital, I took one look at the x-ray and saw that it was a 3.5" nail that went from his hard palate, through his nose, to the eye socket. The nail literally missed his brain and his optic nerve, which would have made him blind, by less than a fraction of a millimeter each. After removing the nail, the man was completely unscathed as if nothing had happened.

Can you share a story about the funniest mistake you made when you were first starting? Can you tell us what lesson you learned from that?

One of the funniest lessons learned early on in my practice was related to post-op care. I like to be very thorough in my practice, and that includes providing patients with thorough post-op care instructions. I am also very well known for creating natural-looking dimples. After one particular case, one of my patients called me at midnight following her surgery, to let me know that she had done something "very adult" and was concerned of the potential implications to the stitches and the procedure. Thankfully, nothing had happened, but while I told her she shouldn't do that for a little while longer, it was a learning lesson that while we keep our post-

op instructions PG-13 on paper, our office began implementing a protocol to address all “adult behavior” post-operatively.

Are you working on any new or exciting projects now?

We’re always working on innovative things but one of my passions is sunblock because I truly believe it can help prevent people from getting skin cancer. Many years ago, when I first started my practice, we started carrying our own sunblock. It’s chemical-free, so it provides a physical barrier to the UVA and UVB rays. It’s slightly tinted and dries clear, unlike other sunblocks which require you to vigorously rub out the white pastiness of it. A lot of patients love the texture of ours and the effectiveness of it. Because of how they’re made, we would get small batches of it and it would sell out quickly, so we’re working on expanding the availability of this.

None of us are able to achieve success without some help along the way. Is there a particular person who you are grateful towards who helped get you to where you are? Can you share a story about that?

I’ve been fortunate to have great mentors in my life. One of my biggest mentors from medical school once told me that in medicine you don’t trust anyone, not even your own mother! Part of my personality is to double check (and sometimes triple and quadruple check especially when it comes to measurements) everything anyways. When you’re dealing with someone’s face, everything matters!

The second thing he taught was to always do the right thing for the patient! It seems like such an obvious thing, but it’s completely true. I don’t cut corners because in the end, I have peace of mind knowing that I did the right thing for the patient.

Is there a particular book that made an impact on you? Can you share a story?

One of my favorite books is Les Misérables. In particular, the part of the book that stands out is when the main character, Jean Valjean, steals these candlesticks from the church. When he gets caught and the police bring him back to the church to question the priest, he says that he gave them to Jean Valjean and they weren’t stolen. That becomes a turning point for Jean Valjean to become a better person and impart that compassion to others. This story stands out for me because small acts of compassion can be really impactful for people — more than we realize.

How have you used your success to bring goodness to the world?

I strive to use my surgical skills combined with compassion for patients to treat the patient as a whole. I always say that I'm part plastic surgeon and part therapist because it's really about making the patient feel better about themselves and look better!

Can you please give us your favorite "Life Lesson Quote"? Can you share a story about how that was relevant to you in your own life?

"Be the best you can be and use it to help someone else."

I've always worked hard to be the best I could be. I wasn't motivated by others but it was a self-motivation to be the best I could be. When I was at Stanford, I wanted to explore all the opportunities I could that were available (and there were a lot!).

Here is the main question of our interview. What are your "5 Things You Need To Create A Successful Career As A Plastic Surgeon" and why? (Please share a story or example for each.)

1. Have patience. This is so important on multiple levels, from having patience to building a patient base, to learning about insurance and billing, to creating a strong support team in the office. This builds the patient's experience starting from even before they come into the office to after they leave the office.

2. Have a vision and be able to adapt. Doctors are extremely busy, and some rely solely on their staff to keep them abreast of everything. However, it's important to keep your finger on the pulse of treatments and procedures that are hot, as well as new technologies. Doctors tend to be dinosaurs sometimes and resistant to change, but the reality is we need to evolve to keep up with the world around us.

A good example is incorporating the latest technology in the office. We had 3D computer imaging that allows us to make an avatar of our patients and make changes so that they can see what they might look like after surgery. Our hair camera for our hair loss patients undergoing

PRP treatments counts and measures the thickness of every hair in the picture so that we can quantitatively monitor their progress.

Another example was brought on by the recent pandemic. This forced us to adapt and make our paperwork digital and do our consultations via Zoom. Now, we do this for all of our patients even if they are local to be more efficient. We've changed our workflow in the office to eliminate as much paper as we can and do everything on Ipads. It's required that we take the time to learn and adapt, but ultimately it will lead to a more efficient and environmentally sound process.

3. Care about your patients and see them as people! Sometimes doctors are taught to separate themselves from their patients but I really like to get to know my patients, their families, their careers and challenges. I think it allows me to be a better doctor for them because I can understand what they are seeking and what their goals are and how that might fit into their lifestyles. For example, my celebrity patients require treatments that have minimal down time and really no margin of error. They would rather sacrifice a little bit of the results for a significant decrease in risk. After surgeries, I like to call the patients myself, or sometimes I'll have the staff do it, just to check in and make sure they are doing ok and answer any questions they might have. Furthermore, I like to see my patients on a pretty regular schedule after surgery to make sure everything is healing as it should.

4. Seek advice from someone who's already done it. Ok, so this is an important one. It's always nice to ask your colleagues who you trust for advice because they're probably already experienced it. There's a wealth of knowledge to be imparted and you don't have to reinvent the wheel. When I was a resident at UCLA, one of the community doctors would always come and give a lecture on the things he learned while building a practice, and he told us he's still building even though it's been 30 years! He shared a lot of practical advice and all of his patient forms. These are not things that are taught in residency because forms are taken care of by the hospital. Whether it's something as simple as recommending an answering service or questions about consents, it doesn't hurt to learn vicariously through someone who's already been through it.

5. Always do the right thing for the patient. There's nothing more comfortable than being able to sleep with your legs stretched out at night. It just isn't worth it to be motivated to do something for the wrong reasons. I'm fortunate to have been selected to become a doctor who can help so many people. The most gratifying thing is knowing that you've helped someone- whether it was a reconstructive case like the bear mauling victim or a domestic violence victim or a cosmetic patient who just wanted to feel better about themselves.

What are the “myths” that you would like to dispel about being a plastic surgeon? Can you explain what you mean?

Myth 1: Male plastic surgeons are better surgeons:

Having an idea of what will give the patient good looking results vs. performing surgery to meet the patient’s goal and her idea of beauty are two different things. As an example, male plastic surgeons usually recommend larger cup sizes for breast augmentation. However, female patients want something that looks natural and they don’t always want a significantly larger size. Also female plastic surgeons tend to be more detail-oriented and patient.

Myth 2: All plastic surgeons are the same:

One of the biggest differences is a plastic surgeon vs. a *facial* plastic surgeon. A general plastic surgeon does general surgery before doing further subspecialty training in plastic and reconstructive surgery. They generally operate on the entire body. Whereas a *facial* plastic surgeon receives training as a head and neck surgeon, before doing further subspecialty training in facial plastics and reconstructive surgery. The head and neck area is extremely intricate with a lot of important structures, so it’s imperative that you see someone who is a specialist in that area to try and minimize complications. Furthermore, if a person is undergoing rhinoplasty with functional issues (such as difficulty breathing through the nose), a facial plastic surgeon can address both — the functional and aesthetics.

Myth 3: All cosmetic surgeons are qualified to perform plastic surgery and injectables:

The four core specialties for aesthetic procedures are: facial plastic surgeons, plastic surgeons, oculoplastics and dermatologists (with dermatologists usually not performing surgery). Unfortunately, any doctor can call themselves a cosmetic surgeon without the appropriate training required to safely perform procedures that yield a desired result.

If you could start a movement that would bring the most amount of wellness to the most amount of people, what would that be?

It would be a movement to wear sunblock because it's anti-aging, prevents skin cancer as well as hyperpigmentation and spots on the skin. More so, chemical free sunblock because it provides a physical barrier to the harmful UVA and UVB rays.

We are very blessed that some of the biggest names in Business, VC funding, Sports, and Entertainment read this column. Is there a person in the world, or in the US whom you would love to have a private breakfast or lunch with, and why? He or she might just see this if we tag them :-)

Condoleza Rice is someone whom I've actually met, have tremendous respect for and would love to have a round of golf with. She has broken through so many glass ceilings: She was the first woman and youngest person to be provost at Stanford (my alma mater); the first African-American woman to become Secretary of State, first female to be National Security Advisor, one of the first two female members admitted to Augusta National Golf Club where the Masters Tournament is held. She is an incredible leader and is extremely accomplished and successful.

What is the best way our readers can follow you online?

Thanks for having me today! You can always follow me on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook at @DrKimberlyLee and on my website at www.kimberlyleemd.com.

Thank you so much for these wonderful insights! We wish you continued success.

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