

## Doctors That Make A Difference



April and Dr. Joseph Niamtu with sons Evan and Joey.

**Dr. Joseph Niamtu, III**  
**Specialty: Oral Maxillofacial  
Surgery/Cosmetic Surgeon**  
**Location: Richmond, Virginia**  
**Cause: GREATER RICHMOND ARC,  
SAFE HARBOR DOMESTIC  
VIOLENCE SHELTER**

*As the father of two profoundly disabled sons many people wonder why (or how) I can offer a good deal of my time to helping others in need. My response is that I have always felt that all doctors have an ethical and moral requirement to give back. Since having two special needs children of my own, I have focused the majority of my pro bono efforts towards children in need.*

Both of my boys, Joey and Evan, have severe cerebral palsy. When Joey was born he appeared to be a normal, healthy child for the first three months of his life. Then he began having seizures and missing milestones and, upon diagnosis, his doctors said he would never be able to walk, talk or develop mentally. He had numerous gastrointestinal problems and went through several surgeries in the first few years of his life. My wife April and I were not sure he would make it through some of these surgeries but he did.

I come from a family that embraces the attitude of never "give up" or "quit". A mantra I have maintained all my life. April and I decided to have another child as one of our primary concerns was who would look after Joey if we weren't around. We both underwent significant genetic counseling and blood testing and were assured that Joey's condition was a genetic mutation in early pregnancy that was extremely rare. We were told that the chance of us having another child with this condition were next to zero.

We were elated when April became pregnant with our second child and did everything in our power to keep April healthy and to do the necessary testing for a safe pregnancy. While Evan appeared normal and healthy at birth, he didn't roll, or crawl, which were all too familiar signs to us. Then at about three months he

began having seizures and the doctors told us that he had the same syndrome as my first son. He began having the same G.I. problems that Joey had and April and I spent so much time in the local hospital ER that it soon became a way of life.

That was over fourteen years ago. I now live with the fact that neither of my children will ever walk or talk, are fed by a tube and can do nothing for themselves. It is not an easy fact to live with but one that we have chosen to accept and embrace completely. As a doctor and teacher it is hard to know that I can never teach my children. My children can only laugh and cry, so I make it my job to make them laugh as much as possible. April and I feel fortunate that we have been able to work together over the years to modify our home so we did not have to institutionalize our sons. This included adding a wing to our home along with wheel chair ramps, an elevator and around the clock nursing. I am fortunate that I am in a position to afford this type of care. However, we have also found that there are many families in worse situations than ours, families that are far less fortunate and we feel it our duty to help them.

Over the years, April and I have worked feverishly with many charitable organization and I offer pro-bono surgery wherever I can. We are also ardent

contributors to groups like the Greater Richmond ARC, which was established in 1954 by families for families. Since that time they have grown into a respected organization that each year helps over 1,400 individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. April and I are on-going sponsors of ARC's Annual Ladybug Wine Tasting event that benefits infant intervention. I am also a community spokesperson for Safe Harbor domestic violence shelter whose aim is to end the cycle of domestic violence. I often find myself treating facial injuries for shelter residents pro-bono and recently operated on a woman whose husband shot her in the head with a 40 caliber handgun while she was holding her infant. She lost vision in her left eye but I was able to treat her scars and facial damage.

Additionally, we have been involved with the Richmond Branch of Operation Smile and have worked with many other charities including Connor's Heroes, Noah's Children and Heal the Children, which are groups that support children with cancer and other serious diseases. My wife and my staff and I now have a 30 year history of volunteering and giving back to the community. It's been a part of my practice mission since day one. [www.lovetheface.com](http://www.lovetheface.com).