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For [Trinity] Aston, the results were immediate and astonishing. Going into the procedure, his goal was to lead a contacts-free life. Goal attained, [Arun] Gulani said.

Photo by **JON M. FLETCHER**/The Times-Union

Ophthalmologist Arun Gulani performs vision-correction surgery on Trinity Aston, who works as an independent contractor, providing security for diplomats in Iraq. Aston suffered from severe farsightedness, which remains problematic for eye surgeons.

CLEAR VISIONS

A Jacksonville eye surgeon's life-changing procedure on a patient

By **JEREMY COX**
The Times-Union

As the operating room's high-tech equipment sighed to a stop, Jacksonville ophthalmologist Arun Gulani turned to the recumbent patient before him and asked, "Can you see a little bit already?"

"Yeah," a surprised Trinity Aston responded.

"Can you see the time?"

Squinting into the new light, Aston correctly replied, "It's 10:36."

Now, for the real test: "Take a look at your family," Gulani instructed, gesturing toward the four faces peering in at Aston through the window behind him.

"Wow," Aston said, his Army-honed stoicism splintering. "I can see!"

To understand Aston's plight, imagine being legally blind without glasses or contacts and being told over and over there's nothing

that science can do for you. And imagine that, as an independent contractor charged with protecting diplomats in the Iraq war zone, eyesight is a matter of life and death to you.

Just as you're about to give up hope, a friend tells you about a surgeon in Jacksonville, only a couple of hours from your home, who can fix your sight in the time it takes to microwave a frozen dinner. It sounds too good to be true.

Until it happens.

On the face of it, Aston's experience illustrates how much Lasik surgery has advanced over the past two decades, from healing a select few types of eye defects to an array of ocular problems.

But it also shows how something as seemingly impersonal as eye surgery can profoundly impact the lives of two extraordinary people — an ophthalmologist pushing the limits of technology and a warrior succeed-

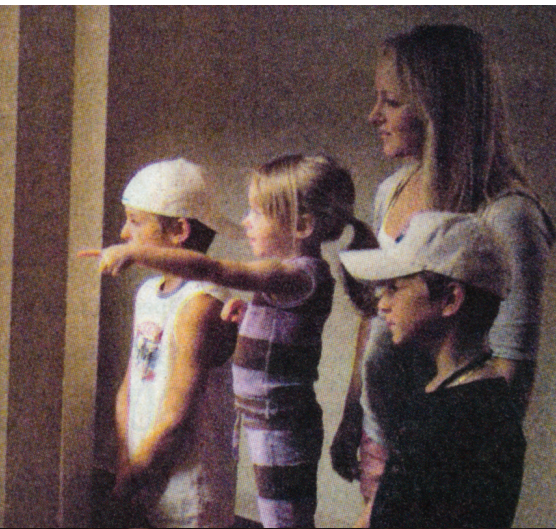
ing in the face of a critical impairment.

A kid named Trinity

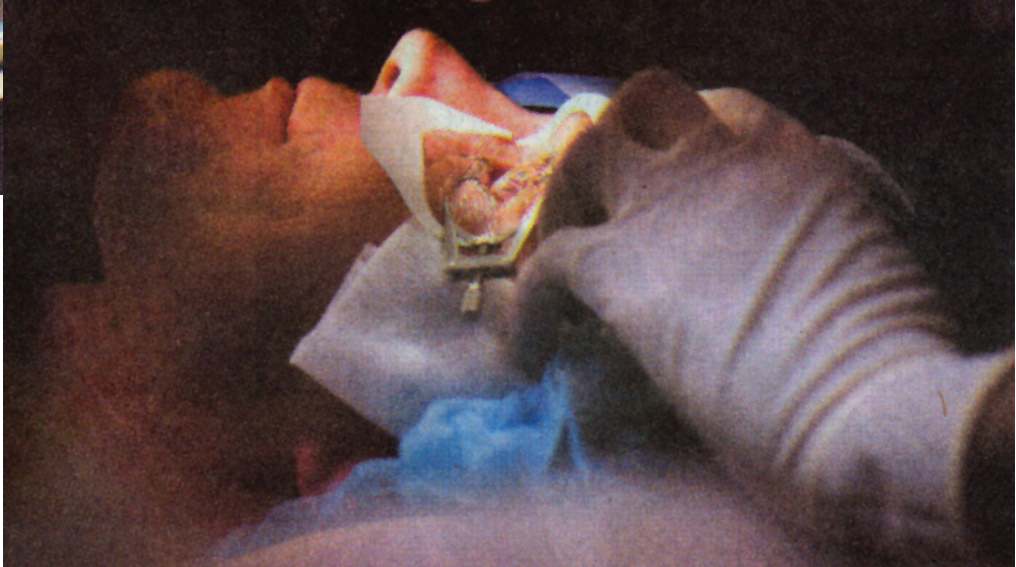
A name like Trinity would seem to suggest the presence of a pious parent in one's household, maybe a fallen nun. In Aston's case, his mother simply was memorializing her newborn's resemblance to the blond-haired, blue-eyed lead character in the 1971 spaghetti Western *They Call Me Trinity*.

Aston, who lives in Ocala, spent six years in the Army. His grit and proficiency with a rifle enabled him to become a sergeant with the First Ranger Battalion, an elite special forces group.

In 2002, he joined the Florida National Guard. With the invasion of Iraq a year later, Aston found himself patrolling the streets of Ramadi in the heart of the violent Sunni Triangle.



Trinity Aston undergoes laser eye surgery as fiancée Lindsay Zachmeier and his children, Cody (from left), Gracie and Tyler, watch.



Aston is prepped for corrective eye surgery by ophthalmologist Arun Gulani at the Gulani Vision Institute in Jacksonville.

For Aston, the danger was magnified. He had worn glasses or contacts since he was 3. He could get along with contacts reasonably well, as his near-sharpshooter status attests. But without them, his vision was no better than 20/800, four times worse than what the government considers legally blind.

And in the sand and wind of Iraq contacts could be a big problem.

Aston, 31, was cryptic about what he currently does in Iraq. He said he's an independent contractor, but declined to say for what company. He said he provides "diplomatic security" but wouldn't elaborate. Carrying a gun and being able to use it remain job requirements, he allowed.

"I've got to see what I'm shooting at," he said.

Because he was extremely farsighted and suffered from astigmatism, no eye surgeon would touch him. Vision-correction surgery has made huge strides since the patenting of Lasik surgery in 1989, but severe farsightedness remains beyond the scope of what many surgeons can fix.

'A special situation'

Arun Gulani is among the few who can.

A veteran of Jacksonville's Mayo Clinic, Gulani has jumped to the top of his field in recent years. He has written several chapters in a new DVD textbook for Lasik surgeons. And he has designed his own

tools for cutting and shaping the eye, tools that allow him to make finer adjustments than many of his peers.

He scoffs at advertising his services, but he isn't afraid of a little self-promotion either. All of the televisions in Gulani's office play, on a continuous loop, his appearances on local TV newscasts. His personal motto, though, has a selfless ring: "Every eyeball has a human being attached to it."

So when Gulani designed his surgical plan for Aston, the ophthalmologist was adamant about avoiding blades, although he rarely uses them anyway. Any cuts with a blade might disqualify Aston for certain activities, such as becoming a pilot, Gulani said.

"He's in a special situation with danger around him," Gulani said.

Astonished at the results

The surgery blinked by. Aston gripped a blue, stuffed

Martian toy between white knuckles as Gulani shined a laser into both eyes for little more than a minute each.

The most remarkable thing about the procedure happened at a microscopic level. Aided by his specially designed tools, Gulani folded back a layer of cornea on each eye, measuring about 50 to 70 microns in width, about the thickness of a strand of fine hair. In traditional Lasik surgery, Gulani said, the peeled-back layer is up to 160 microns thick. Going thinner minimizes complications that would throw off Aston's marksmanship.

For Aston, the results were immediate and astonishing. Going into the procedure, his goal was to lead a contacts-free life. Goal attained, Gulani said.

"He will not use any contacts or glasses."

At the threshold to the operating room, Gracie, his 3-year-old daughter, asked him if he could tie her shoelaces. Aston

bent over and laced up her shoes, without contacts for the first time.

Gulani, who performs such surgeries a handful of times every day, was touched by the scene.

"That's an event that can't be replicated," he said.

jeremy.cox@jacksonville.com, (904) 359-4083