

# Transformative medicine

Michael Brownstein, MD'66, SB'62, helped hundreds of patients become the men they wanted to be

BY LAURA RAMOS HEGWER

When Michael Brownstein, MD'66, SB'62, embarked on a career in plastic surgery, he never imagined he would become internationally known for providing life-changing surgery to the transgender community. But when a transgender male patient came to his office seeking a more male-appearing chest, Brownstein performed the surgery and found it fascinating.

"I got good results, and the practice grew because patients appreciated that they had access to care in a setting that was compassionate and nonjudgmental," Brownstein said.

For the next 40 years, Brownstein's San Francisco-based practice was limited almost exclusively to female-to-male "top surgery," and he became one of the world's leading experts in two types of bilateral chest reconstruction. The more common procedure was a simple mastectomy with nipple and areolar reconstruction. The other was a subcutaneous mastectomy, or "keyhole operation," which was reserved for small-breasted patients.

"Every procedure was different because every patient was different, and some were very challenging because of the size or shape of the patient's chest," said Brownstein, who performed as many as 200 surgeries a year. The age of his patients also varied widely, from adolescents

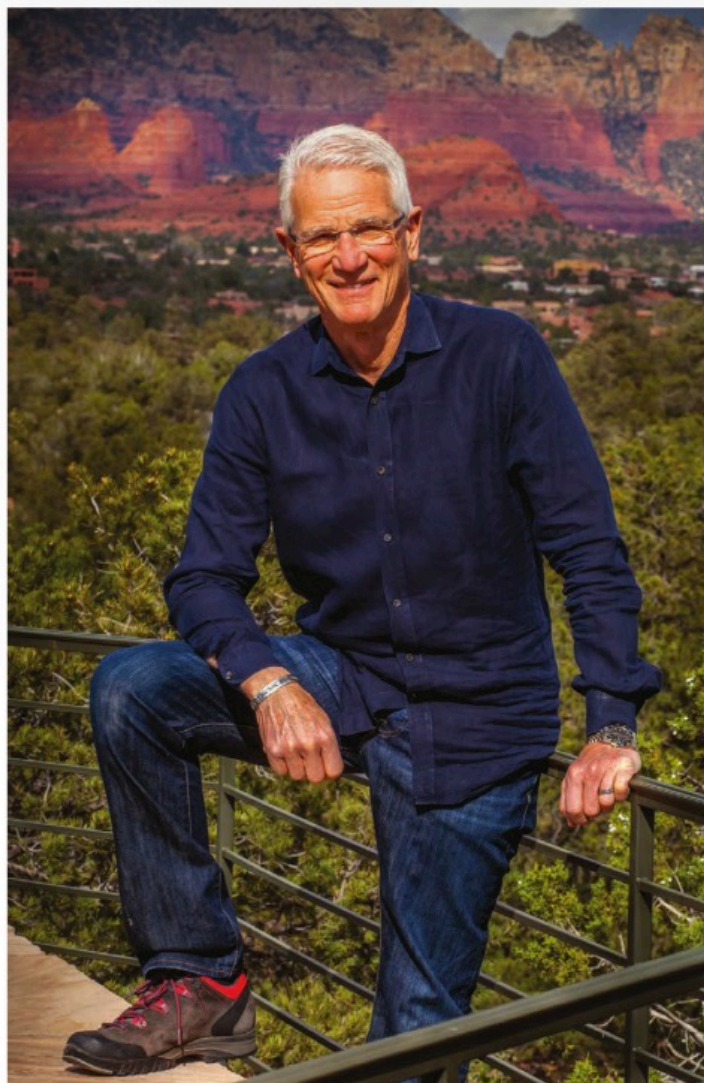


PHOTO BY PAUL SCHLISMANN

Michael Brownstein, MD'66, SB'62, is writing a memoir about his work with the transgender community.

to adults in their 70s.

Early in Brownstein's practice, some of his peers in the medical community frowned upon the care he provided to transgender patients, a problem he blames on a lack of understanding. "People assume caring for transgender and gender non-conforming

patients is difficult. It's not. What's challenging is dealing with others, such as families, insurance companies and other health care professionals." Eventually, many colleagues came to accept that he was serving an unmet need. "My patients are real people who need a surgical

procedure to bring their physical body in line with their gender," Brownstein said.

Brownstein's practice grew significantly with the rise of the Internet, and patients from as far as Europe, South America, Asia and the Middle East sought his expertise. He also trained other surgeons on the techniques he developed for bilateral chest reconstruction, including several residents from the University of Chicago Medicine who shadowed him.

Brownstein served on the board of the World Professional Association for Transgender Health and earned honors from the city and county of San Francisco for his service to the transgender community.

When Brownstein retired in 2012, he was flooded with notes from grateful patients. Today, he lives with his wife, Denise Grant, in Sedona, Arizona, where he is writing a memoir about his work with the transgender community. This summer, he will return to San Francisco to speak at an event honoring the life of noted transgender activist Lou Sullivan, a former patient who died of AIDS in 1991.

Brownstein believes caring for this underserved population was one of the most rewarding aspects of his career. "The patients were appreciative and grateful, which is one of the reasons I enjoyed the practice so much, and why it was so meaningful," he said.