

Hey, Doll, Need a Quick Fix?

Here's a hospital that has never lost a patient

By Effie Pavlou
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At Irving Chais' hospital on Lexington Avenue, patients arrive with heads cracked open, limbs torn off and eyes poked out. They leave looking as if nothing happened — just like in Roadrunner cartoons.

"We never use pain killers, and we've never lost a patient," Chais, 66, likes to say.

"We're doll doctors," said Chais' assistant, Luis Hernando Casas, holding a chubby bisque leg.

A faint, pungent smell of paint is present in the cramped room with the low tin ceiling of the New York Doll Hospital, "one flight up" on Lexington Avenue between 61st and

62nd Streets. Doll heads with different facial expressions — from happy to suspicious to nutty — crowd the dusty shelves.

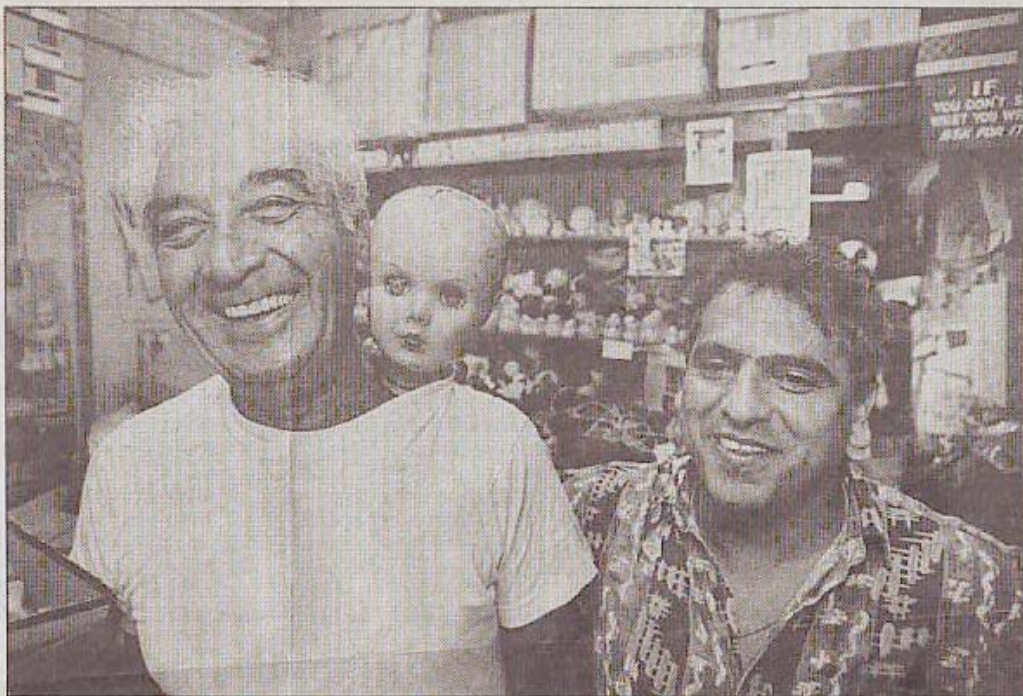
Chais' family has run the New York Doll Hospital for three generations. It started when his grandparents, immigrants from Dresden, Germany, opened a beauty salon facing Roosevelt Island in the late 1890s.

"The mommies brought their kids because there were no babysitters," Chais said. "The kids brought their dollies for company and to get their hair done, too." Upon request, for 35 cents, Chais' grandmother would tear off a doll's old mop and replace it with a new one.

But the family business — and tradition — may end with Chais. "It seems like there's no one after me" in the family to carry on the business, he said. "My kids aren't interested. You can't force your ambitions on others." Chais has two adult daughters. One is a saleslady and dietician, the other works as a chef.

"One of my daughters, 30 years old, still has her toy monkey. 'Georgie,' she calls him," he said, shaking his head as he restrung a doll's arms. One client, a married 40-year-old woman with children, sent postcards to Charlie, her childhood teddy bear, during the week he spent at the Doll Hospital to get his head stitched.

"Dolls are like miniature people," Chais said. "They have eyes, faces, arms, hands and 'a look.' After a while,



Irving Chais, left, and his assistant Luis Casas play doctor at the New York Doll Hospital.

you look at them, and they become alive, a friend, companion, buddy, associate, whatever. I think it's admirable to show your feelings, to let yourself go and love a teddy bear."

Chais named celebrities he said have left treasures at the Doll Hospital — Dustin Hoffman, Laurence Olivier, Paul Newman, Imogene Coca, Sid Caesar, Milton Berle, Leslie Uggams.

"This job is very important because you're play-

ing with people's sentiments," said Casas, 40, who's been working with Chais for three years. "People set their hearts on dolls their mothers, fathers or boyfriends gave them, and it's up to the doll doctor to fix them just the right way."

Casas said working at the Doll Hospital fulfills his dream of becoming a doctor. He couldn't afford medical school in his native Colombia, so he studied business administration instead, and made extra money working at the Fabrica Nacional de Munecos (National Doll Factory) in Bogota.

Then he opened a family business, still in operation — La Clinica de Munecos (the Doll Clinic), where employees dressed in white clothes push doll occupied stretchers into rooms labeled "Operating Room" and "Recovery Room." He has pictures to prove it, he said.

"You've gotta want to do it," Chais said about restoring dolls. "You need artistic ability, mechanical ability . . ."

"And lots of patience," Casas added.

They said the most annoying to work with are beeswax dolls, and celluloid dolls.

"I've made some interesting psychological observations after 52 years in the doll business," Chais said. "Sometimes you see a woman with four kids, all sons, and she suddenly becomes a doll collector, as if to make up for the daughter she never had."

Chais complained that today's dolls "all look the same — no charm, no sweetness, no character." Cabbage Patch Kids? "Ugly, just like pigs," he said. Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles? He murmured an insult behind his hand.

"What we need today," he said, "is a nice, cuddly baby doll that says, 'Ma-ma!'"



Chais' family has been repairing dolls for three generations.

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