

Luis Casas tends to a broken "patient" at the New York Doll Hospital in Manhattan. Although he's technically the "teddy bear man," Casas also works on dolls. Robert A. Sabo photos/The Journal News

Plastic surgery

Broken hearts are mended at the New York Doll Hospital

MITCH BRODER
The Journal News

Jerry Baum plants himself at the center of the operating room and addresses the surgeon, who doesn't look up because he is sanding a thigh.

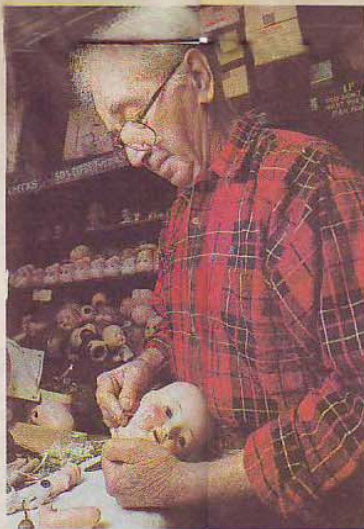
"This is a teddy bear," Baum announces, clutching some fur in the shape of a bear that appears to have made a few trips through the car wash. "I bought it for my son at FAO Schwarz the day he was born, 36 years ago. Now my son's wife is expecting a baby and I want to get it refurbished."

The surgeon may be touched, but he keeps to his thigh. After all, he is the doll doctor. What Baum wants is the bear doctor. The surgeon calls in the bear man, who performs an examination. As if sensing something, Baum says: "I think I paid \$15 for that thing."

The bear will need his coat cleaned. The bear will need new paw pads. The bear will need a new button and, more critically, a new squeaker. "To fix this properly, it will be \$425," says the bear man. Baum begins to look as if he could use the man man.

But, of course, there is none, for this is the New York Doll Hospital, which of late has added the shingle of Teddy Bear Hospital. This is the doll hospital that's known around the world. And it's the doll hospital that puts your toy love to the test.

The chief surgeon — the guy with the thigh — is



Irving Chais ministers to a doll, much as Chais family members have for generations. Below, spare parts.

Irving Chais, who has spent 60 years in the business his family has run for a hundred. He charges, he says, what he must. And he doesn't treat sticker shock. He won't bargain any more than, say, New York Presbyterian.

Apparently, this hasn't hurt business. Chais works five days plus Sunday, assisted on three days by the bear man, Luis Casas. They minister to almost any creature, so long as it isn't alive. And their reputation has a way of overcoming their fee.

Baum, who is now sitting, sits for a long time. He bargains unsuccessfully. He adds details to his story. He had walked to FAO Schwarz in a blizzard that day, he reveals. Surely that is worth something. Turns out that it's not.

"Would you spend the money?" Baum asks Casas, in a final ploy.

"If I had the money, I'd spend it," Casas answers cryptically.

"I'll have to send you a check," Baum sighs, gazing into his bear's face. "How could I not?"

Then he adds sadly: "I should have bought two."

OLD WORLD

Nobody bought two. That's why there's a hospital. Most patients predate a world in which toys have become investments. The whole place predates a world in which toys have become investments. Not to mention predating a world that has progressed beyond radio.

The hospital — at 787 Lexington Ave., in

Please see HOSPITAL, 2E



Broken hearts are mended at the New York Doll Hospital

HOSPITAL, from 1E

Manhattan — occupies two second-floor rooms direct from Central Casting. A neon sign that reads "Doll Hospital" crackles in the front window. An exhaust fan squeals. The pipes clank. When opened, the front door tinkles.

The major nod to technology, besides two Triline telephones, is a retired mechanical cash register whose drawer is eternally open. It's on a glue-encrusted wooden desk whose drawers are eternally open. There's very little in the place that isn't eternally open.

Below the peeling-paint stalactites that have formed on the tin ceiling is a pile that starts at the floor and threatens to reach the stalactites. It contains dozens of dolls and animals that are now transplant donors. You feel especially bad for Snoopy. He's squished down at the bottom.

You feel worse for what's everywhere else — the inevitable doll corpses, armless, legless, faceless, eyeless. One, on its back, inadvertently holds its own head. "Some kids can't take it," Chais says. "They see the heads, and they can't handle it."

They'd better not visit the back room. There they would see the torsos — suspended over a work table from wires attached to the ceiling. They'd see the freshly painted feet with the cartons and drawers with labels like "German Limbs" and "French Bodies."

But it's all just backdrop to the 74-year-old chief surgeon, who merely operates within — standing up, like any good surgeon. "I always stand up when I work," he says. "I don't like to sit, 'cause I'm a young fella. Sometimes I have lunch standing up."

Unlike his work environment, he is the opposite of gruesome, with his well-arranged fluffy white hair and his Marcus Welby face. He works constantly, pausing only to answer the phone and the door, or to sip cranberry juice cocktail from his Grumpy cartoon glass.

The thigh he's been sanding belongs to a '50s Rita the Walking Doll, who checked in, predictably, because she could no longer walk. Getting Rita back on her feet is tricky work, Chais says. Fortunately, not every doll repair is.

While fitting the leg back onto the 27-inch doll, he hears a noise. "Something's rattling in there."



Patients at the New York Doll Hospital are dealt with one at a time, which explains a backlog and the extensive collection of spare parts at Luis Casas' disposal as he sands a doll head.

cess. "Sometimes you clean the doll," Casas says, "and they've become accustomed to seeing it dirty. As soon as you clean it, it's not my doll."

Still other patrons never actually turn into patrons. Usually because they can't clear the hurdle Jerry Baum did.

"With some people," Chais says, "we'll say it's fifteen hundred dollars, and they'll say, 'That's very reasonable. I thought it would be more. Can I give you a check?' And with others, we'll say it's twenty dollars, and they'll say, 'Twenty dollars? You're a crook, you're a crook!'"

The prices, the men say, are based on labor, not on the (monetary) value of the patient.

Baum's bear, for instance, is a mohair Steiff animal worth hundreds.

But a similar operation would

cost the same for a no-name bear.

Unfortunately, Chais says, some people seem to feel that since dolls are not real people, the work is not real work.

"I had a call from a woman who I could tell was well-educated," he says. "She had an 1880 French doll with pure silk clothes. She had a lot of clothes and they needed a lot of work. She asked if I could get raw silk and dye it so it'll be a perfect match."

"She also wanted shoes to match. And hair to match. And underwear to match. And a big glass globe to put over the doll. I said I could do it all. And after all this conversation, the woman finally says: 'Is there a charge?'"

TOY STORY

That's the downside. The upside is that Chais loves to fix dolls, even

"I'm so happy I walked up here for \$425," Baum deadpans.

"Look at it this way," Chais deadpans back. "If we didn't fix it, who would?"

TODAY

Rockland

■ Robert D'Antoni exhibits photographs taken during travels through Ireland, Italy, Central America and the U.S. 9 a.m.-9 p.m., free. Finkelstein Memorial Library, 24 Chestnut St., Spring Valley. 352-5700, Ext. 243.

Westchester/Putnam

■ "Living Art in Oil," an exhibit of paintings by George R. Fields, opens: 1-9 p.m., free. Warner Library, 121 N. Broadway, Tarrytown. 631-7734.

after 60 years. Great-grandpa would be proud.

In the 19th century, Phillip Chais — great-grandpa — operated on dolls in the Chais family's homeland of Germany. Abraham and Sophie Chais — grandpa and grandma — carried on the business here. But not on purpose.

They had run a beauty salon at the present site of the Roosevelt Island Tramway. Women with Victorian curls spent a lot of time there. The women brought their daughters, who brought their dolls, which often broke. Abraham and Sophie sent to Germany for parts.

Before long, they were doing better with the dolls than with the hair. In 1900, the salon became the New York Doll Hospital. After the First World War, it was passed to David and Dora Chais — dad and mom — and after the Second World War, to Irving himself.

Chais's daughter Dana has a career as a dietitian. But his other daughter, Alison Hirsch, works at the hospital. Though still a babe in toyland, she has the potential to take over. Then again, the chief surgeon may just go on and on.

He's up at 4:50 a.m., and by 6 (three days a week) he's at the Y, where he works out for an hour and a half. He takes a swim, showers up and heads for the doll hospital, where he works standing up from around 8:30 till exactly 6.

His skills appear undiminished, as does his confidence — which he exhibits as Jerry Baum heads for the tinkling door.