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“The Colonel” An interview with John Baxley

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“The Colonel” An interview with John Baxley

(Dr. Morris): You and I got together a few years ago to treat your eyes didn't we?

(Colonel): That's right.

(Dr. Morris): So what I am asking you to do is just tell us your story this morning so that doctors around the world can understand the problem you suffered from. So I wanted to ask you, you represent Colonel Sanders don't you.

(Colonel): That's right, I am a Colonel Sanders look-alike and I am Goodwill Ambassador for Kentucky Fried Chicken.

(Dr. Morris): So you are the official Colonel Sanders look-alike for KFC.

(Colonel): As far as I know, I am the only one.

(Dr. Morris): And you went through a contest or were selected for that purpose.

(Colonel): That's right.

(Dr. Morris): You knew Colonel Sanders didn't you?

(Colonel): Yes, I met him in 1962, down in Florida. I was working with a franchisee opening stores there and we had the Colonel down for a grand opening and after that, I got a chance to travel with him some in the early days and pick up some of his philosophy and his mannerisms that I have been able to use through the years.

(Dr. Morris): That's great, that's great. You travel all over the world?

(Colonel): My wife and I have been around the world three times doing the Colonel look-alike. I have been in over 150 cities and about 28 countries and up until about eight years ago, my wife went with me everywhere I went but she has arthritis and she cannot take these long plane trips. So I am on my own and when I leave home, I am the Colonel 'til I get back home.

(Dr. Morris): That interesting. You are a global icon aren't you?

(Colonel): Well, Ad-week (Advertising Week) magazine has a contest every year for the icon of the year and I think the year before gecko and Juan Valdez, they were tied for first place. I was up there in July because they told me that I had won the contest and I went up and we went into one of the theaters there and they had a fellow on the stage, well Mr. Kool-aid was number two and I was number one.

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(Dr. Morris): In Ad-week magazine?

(Colonel): Ad-week magazine.

(Dr. Morris): Icon of the Year, that's great. Well you are an icon for all the right reasons. People love Colonel Sanders don't they?

(Colonel): Around the world. The kids in daycares over there are taught about Colonel Sanders and any child six years old in China knows who Colonel Sanders is.

(Dr. Morris): Isn't that wonderful.

(Colonel): Yep.

(Dr. Morris): That's, great. That's a great thing. Let me see if I had a couple more comments. Do you represent Colonel Sanders and KFC or Kentucky Fried Chicken full time? I mean this is what you do week in and week out isn't it.

(Colonel): I am on call anytime. If somebody calls me and says they are opening a new store or they have a parade or a homecoming and if I have those dates available I go and so far, I have been able to make all the appearance but one that I know of.

(Dr. Morris): And how many years have you been doing this?

(Colonel): This is 15 years.

(Dr. Morris): Fifteen years. Can you tell us something about the public's response to your appearances?

(Colonel): Well most people know that Colonel Sanders is dead but his image did not die and I am able to go in and show these second and third generation franchisees what the Colonel looked like and they have accepted me as the “Colonel” now and that I look as near like him as they can come up with so they say. And

(Dr. Morris): And act as near like him because you knew him.

(Colonel): Yes, yes. He was a great old guy. He was loved around the world. He was known for his involvement in children's programs and with the elderly and, so, people just loved him around the world. But, I just have a chance to bring back as near as possible, what the Colonel looked like.

(Dr. Morris): That's great. You have to fly and/or drive to get to your appearances don't you?

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(Colonel): That’s right. I leave Birmingham today and I drive to Atlanta and board a plane to New York City. I will be working there tomorrow and tomorrow night and then come back on Wednesday. But that’s the way the schedule goes. I was there three days last week.

(Dr. Morris): I see.

(Colonel): And so, I am available and on the go whenever they need me.

(Dr. Morris): Colonel, you came to see me in December 2004 didn’t you?

(Colonel): Yes sir.

(Dr. Morris): Tell us your story about why you came to see me.

(Colonel): Well, like I said before, I travel so much, around the world, and I started developing floaters in my left eye. At first it was just an annoyance and then it got to be just downright aggravating because I would have to close that eye and use the other if I wanted to see clearly and, of course, when you close one eye you lose your depth perception, so it was dangerous to be doing that. I had gone to some optometrists in my area that at first told me that there was nothing to be done about floaters and that eventually they might go away. Well instead of going away, it got worse. There were more floaters and the left eye became almost useless but I was seeing through my right eye. Then I started developing floaters in my right eye and soon it got to where I could not read the exit signs at the interchanges on the highway. I could not read street signs in town because if you moved your eye to the left or the right to move the floaters out of the way, by the time you got to read your sign, they were already back and covering it up, so it was a blur.

(Dr. Morris): Let me interrupt you and say that when I first met you in the exam room you read 20/25 in the right 20/30 in the left eye and that’s almost 20/20 and yet you are telling me that you could not see these things. Can you explain that to us?

(Colonel): Well see, that is what happens when you went for an eye exam. When you move the floater over, you could see the chart fine, and that’s what the optometrist saw. And, so, there was no concern as far as they were concerned about. So it got to where it was going to cause me to give up the Colonel look-alike.

(Dr. Morris): So you were going to have to give up your job?

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(Colonel): Yes, yes. It was too dangerous for me. My wife had rheumatoid arthritis and she couldn't go with me anymore on some of these trips and I did not trust myself by my self. So I went to an optometrist and I said, look she had mentioned this surgery as a possibility, but at that time, I thought, nobody's cuttin' on one of my eyes. I can see enough to live with them, but I don't want to give up my sight and I thought that might be a possibility. This one optometrists said, "I want you to go see Dr. Robert Morris over in Birmingham", and she sent me to you. And then when you examined my eyes and explained this surgery to me, I knew that you knew what you were doing and you were sold on the procedure and so I was sold on it and at that time, we made the appointment for the first surgery on the left eye.

(Dr. Morris): And so, before you ever came to us, you recognized that there was risk to an operation and those risks were...?

(Colonel): Well, any operation, anything where there is any cutting or piercing there is the chance of having, getting it infected. And, and I know that can be real serious. I have a son that is a family practice physician down in Orlando and when I explained this to him, he said, "Well, you had back surgery didn't you?" I said yes and I had some surgery on my neck and different places, on my knee and he said, "Did the fact that you might have infection cause you to be concerned about that?" I said no, I got through those fine. He said, "Well you've got the same odds with this."

(Dr. Morris): But to you, the potential benefit outweighed the risks sufficiently for you to choose to have the operation?

(Colonel): I would do anything to get rid of those floaters.

(Dr. Morris): Cause you knew you had to give up your job if you didn't?

(Colonel): That was my future in the job I was doing as the Colonel Sanders look-alike and I did not want to give it up.

(Dr. Morris): What would you say to doctors who are coming into the exam room and seeing the good visual acuity written down on the chart and maybe thinking that the vitreous floaters or vitreous opacities were not that big of a problem, what would you say to those doctors?

(Colonel): I would say you are talking about oranges and apples really. They are two different things. You are talking about the vision where I have moved the floaters out of the way and the vision that I have to live with. Its two different things and I go in and you check my eye and you put what you read on the chart it looks great, but you do not know what it looks like back behind those floaters.

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(Dr. Morris): So, that’s an elegant description of that. So literally, I don’t want to put words in your mouth, but hundreds and hundreds of times a day you are having these obscurations of your vision?

(Colonel): Any time that I am awake. I have these things and then I have the memory of them after I went to sleep, cause they were so aggravating.

(Dr. Morris): Yes. And, so, you were having to contend with them constantly?

(Colonel): Yes.

(Dr. Morris): And from moment to moment your detail vision was varying a great deal?

(Colonel): I was afraid I was going to start having these dancing eyes from trying to look around these things.

(Dr. Morris): So you were actually having to consciously move your eyes around?

(Colonel): Continually, to see any thing.

(Dr. Morris): Interesting. So anyway, we decided together, and you had the final decision to accept some risk to try to get the benefit and we then did an operation on your left eye first, is that correct?

(Colonel): That’s right.

(Dr. Morris): And I told you that you had some cataracts also and that the cataracts might progress right?

(Colonel): Right.

(Dr. Morris): And you might eventually need a cataract extraction also. But we decided to take the cloudiness out first before approaching the cataracts.

(Colonel): That’s right.

(Dr. Morris): So, what was the operation like? How difficult was the operation on your left eye? Was it painful afterwards, etc.?

(Colonel): I never had any pain from either eye and all I know about the surgery was that I woke up with a patch over my eye. We went back over to the motel and spent the night. Come back the next morning, and had the patch taken off and there wasn’t any floaters. We didn’t have any floaters in that left eye when I got through. So the first thing I told my wife was that I wondered how long before I can get this second one done, cause that would really fix it up.

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(Dr. Morris): What can characterize your emotions when you noticed they were gone?

(Colonel): Well, it was like giving me my life back, you know. Because, I had gotten to where I scared myself driving and I couldn't do these things and yet when I came out of surgery it was like having my sight all over again. It affected my wife and I both because she worried to death about me when I was gone because she was afraid I would get into something because I could not see.

(Dr. Morris): And that was a reasonable fear whatn 'it? Now we went ahead and did the other eye a month or so later and how did that go?

(Colonel): The same as the first one. Of course, I mean, I was aware of the procedure then, so it was just like doing the same thing again.

(Dr. Morris): And so after both eyes were clear, it must have really been a new world for you?

(Colonel): Oh, it was. I believe that you told me not to drive home. I could not wait to get in the car lot where I could drive and see signs and all and I drove home anyway (ha-ha).

(Dr. Morris): So your driving was a lot easier and better for you?

(Colonel): By all means, yes.

(Dr. Morris): How about your reading?

(Colonel): I can read anything I want to now.

(Dr. Morris): And you like to work crossword puzzles?

(Colonel): Yeah. This was one of the things. I have been a crossword fan seems like all my life and the harder the better I try to do those things. But when you look at the clue and then look back to the square, the floater was in the way, so it was a constant battle. I pretty soon got to where I could not even do crosswords.

(Dr. Morris): You just gave up crossword puzzles?

(Colonel): 'Til after this surgery.

(Dr. Morris): Now we told you that you were probably facing cataract extraction and you went ahead and did that in both eyes several months later.

(Colonel): About two months later, I scheduled and had cataract surgery.

(Dr. Morris): And that went well for you?

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(Colonel): Just fine.

(Dr. Morris): So all of this was about 2 ½ years ago now?

(Colonel): Yeah.

(Dr. Morris): And so you are happy that you made that decision in December 2004 to get your eye treated?

(Colonel): I couldn't be happier. It turned out so well. From the start, I knew that you knew what you were doing and you were confident of the procedure and so I did not have anything to worry about.

(Dr. Morris): And you were confident that I was going to use that for you, that knowledge for you?

(Colonel): Yes.

(Dr. Morris): What can you do now with your eye? How can you tell that your vision is excellent?

(Colonel): Well, I had a neighbor, and someone gave him an old railroad watch, this was last week and he brought it down to the house and he said, John, I would like to see what this inscription is on the back here, but I do not have a magnifying glass. Do you have one where we can look at this thing? I said well let me see it. And I just turned my reading glass up another notch and I took the thing and held it and got it in focus with my lower part of my trifocal and it came out just as clear, the trade name and the date. And before, I would have never have even known the writing was on there unless someone told me (ha-ha).

(Dr. Morris): How is your vision now compared to when you were a young man 30 years old?

(Colonel): It's better now than it was then.

(Dr. Morris): You've never had better vision than you have right now?

(Colonel): No! I started off having to wear bifocals back there in the 40s and 50s and in business, I needed the other depth. So we went to the tri-vision and it was always a problem because of getting use to glasses and all this. Now, I can read across the bottom of the TV screen without my glasses and sometimes, I forget to put my glasses on and the other day, I got in the car and drove down to the little grocery store to pick up a paper and I started to read something of the paper and I said, I don't even have my glasses on. That's how good I can see now without them.

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(Dr. Morris): That’s interesting. But your glasses are part of your image too?

(Colonel): Got to wear them the rest of my life.

(Dr. Morris): Colonel Sanders wore glasses?

(Colonel): Yes.

(Dr. Morris): Did you wear glasses similar to those?

(Colonel): This is the same style. When I met him in 1962, he wore these glasses and I did too. We both wore the same type frames.

(Dr. Morris): Just by coincidence?

(Colonel): By coincidence, and what happened when I started doing the Colonel look-alike, I had to find a white suit and the bow tie and the cane and all this and I had to find the glasses. Well I went back in the closet and pulled out some old frames I had left, and there they were. Just like I had left them.

(Dr. Morris): Could we see you without your glasses on.

(Colonel): Well.

(Dr. Morris): You still look like the Colonel but your glasses are even better.

(Colonel): Well when I do some TV commercials you have to go in and they have to powder you up and around you know and all. So they take off my glasses and I thought I saw myself without the glasses and you gotta have them to be the Colonel, that’s for sure.

(Dr. Morris): So what’s the value of modern medicine being able to do ---- for your eyes. It a new product isn’t it compared to...?

(Colonel): You know when Jesus was on earth one of the things he did was to cause the blind to see and now with the procedures and equipment and the knowledge of you fellas you are doing the miracles that he did. He’s just delegating you with the responsibility. That’s it.

(Dr. Morris): That’s well put. I asked you, you do not know whether Colonel Sanders actually met or knew Helen Keller.

(Colonel): No, there was some connection back there and I’ve got Colonel’s books, one of his books that he wrote back in the 60s and I think there may be something in there. I am going to have to go home and look at that.

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(Dr. Morris): You're going to do some research?

(Colonel): Yeah, yeah, because he wrote a book, his wife wrote a book and his daughter wrote a book and somewhere in there I've seen something in there about his relationship with Helen Keller.

(Dr. Morris): Now, of course, you know Helen Keller. Have you ever visited her birth place, Ivy Green in Tuscumbia, Alabama. Have you ever been there?

(Colonel): Yes, year before last. My brother and his wife were up here from Florida and we made us a tour map of things we wanted see and we drove over there to Tuscumbia and my brother and I sat on the bench there and talked and let the girls just go through the place. They spent a couple of hours there.

(Dr. Morris): Did you see the well there by any chance?

(Colonel): Yes we did.

(Dr. Morris): Where she learned that water had a name: W-A-T-E-R. You know, they perform the play The Miracle Worker in the backyard every June and July and that will be a real treat for you to attend.

(Colonel): Yes, my wife wants to go back, yes.

(Dr. Morris): Well, it would be a real treat for you and if you would like to go, I would like to go with you and the people there could see you and meet you too. That would be good.

(Colonel): I would like to do that.

(Dr. Morris): Okay, we'll do that. Well thank you very much, Colonel. We appreciate it.

(Colonel): Well, it's a joy for me to be here and to be a part of what you are doing.

(Dr. Morris): He is going to film you and I would like for you just to keep looking at this and make any comments you want that come to mind as you watch it and just wait until we get inside and then you will see some of the vitreous opacities and you will remember those old friends. Some of that material that you were seeing is floating, its floating there in your eye.

(Colonel): Yeah, I see them already. (ha-ha)

(Dr. Morris): They look familiar?

(Colonel): I see that brown kinda like it was a shade or something that you... it was....

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(Dr. Morris): Some of them were fuzzy and all kinds of shapes.

(Colonel): Yeah, and the longer I had them, the more of them there was and the larger they were.

(Dr. Morris): Now were adjusting the light inside the eye to show these because it is difficult to show the. But what you are seeing is you are seeing the surgeon’s view and...

(Colonel): Well I see the floaters and they are the same color and the globs just like I saw.

(Dr. Morris): Just like you saw them three years ago? Now I am aspirating these in and nibbling the gel out and replacing it with clear fluid. And they were all over inside the eye.

(Colonel): You couldn’t get rid of them anymore when it got to that state.

(Dr. Morris): Hundreds of them.

(Colonel): The more they got, the more it was like it was just a mass.

(Dr. Morris): And you can see how cloudy the gel was when you remove them. So we were moving all over the inside of your eye taking that material out and that I is your retina. That’s the nerve tissue and that gold spot is the center of your vision. Now, I am going to switch sides and go in from the other side. The vitreoretina looks good. Well, I think that does it. That the kind of stuff you were seeing.

(Colonel): Yes, now there you could see what I was seeing. When you got in there you could see it from my vision instead of what was on a chart on a wall somewhere, you know.

(Dr. Morris): Yeah and when I was in the exam room, I could look in your eye and see those things. So I am not just trusting your description of your problem, I’m looking in there and I’m saying, is this enough to cause those problems or is he a kook. (ha-ha).

(Colonel): (ha-ha) Well, I was a kook any way.

(Dr. Morris): But I could tell they were enough, you know, from seeing thousands of patients. Many people have small floaters and that’s what we call floaters. But I would call yours vitreous opacities they were so extensive. I dignify them further to say they were just not floaters but opaque areas, opaque vitreous basically. Any other comments? And that is the end of our discussion.

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(Colonel): Well, I just glad you called me. I’m glad I got to come see this and be a part of your presentation.

(Dr. Morris): Yeah, this is research and this is research and education.

(Colonel): Yeah, and if anybody wants to talk to a patient that was successful, give them my number. I’ll be glad to talk with them.