

illness shapes

New Career

“This illness was difficult, but the skill and friendship of my surgeon Dr. Brackmann, has inspired me,” says Julie. “I’ve realized what is really important, and how much friends, family and mentors mean. I learned that I wanted to help people in a more direct way than I could as a performing musician.”

A

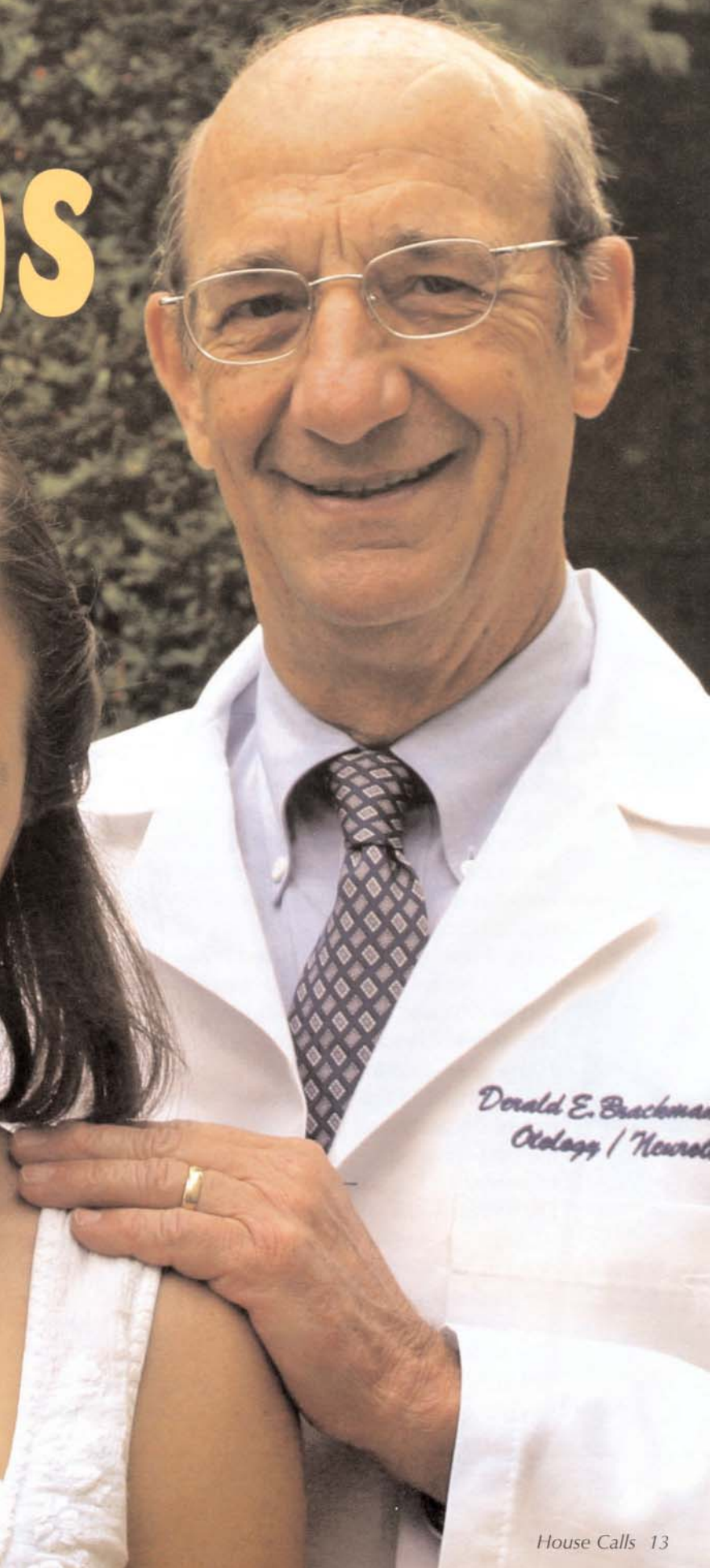
n acoustic neuroma, a brain tumor growing adjacent to the acoustic nerve, left music major and accomplished flutist Julie Allen deaf in one ear. Yet, even with single-sided deafness, Julie was eventually able to play the flute again, completing her music degree at the University of California, Santa Barbara as valedictorian of her graduating class of 5,000 students, and winning the highest graduating award, the Stork medal for service to the community. The experience

of her illness and the expert surgery and follow-up medical care that she received at the House Clinic inspired Julie to change career tracks and pursue a degree in medicine.

“This illness was difficult, but the skill and friendship of my surgeon Dr. Brackmann, has inspired me,” says Julie. “I’ve realized what is really important, and how much friends, family and mentors mean. I learned that I wanted to help people in a more direct way than I could as a performing musician.”



Dreams



Julie has just begun a year-long post-baccalaureate premed program at Johns Hopkins University, and is gearing up to return to Baltimore in September 2005. She visited the House Ear Institute and sat down with House Calls Magazine to tell the story of her acoustic neuroma experience before heading back to school.

After returning from winter break my freshman year in college at UCSB, I began having migraines and woke up each morning with debilitating headaches that would subside just before my 8 a.m. music theory class. My physician thought these headaches were symptoms of stress, which wasn't surprising for a busy, over-extended person. Then one day my hand began tingling during a headache, and I was referred for an MRI. The MRI revealed that I had an acoustic neuroma of 2.8 cm growing on my left balance nerve, yet I still had 100% of my hearing.

I'm thankful that I come from a medical family, because they were able to identify the best centers for acoustic neuroma treatment and found the House Clinic and Dr. Brackmann. My parents drove me to Los Angeles for my first consultation with Dr. Brackmann. During our consultation, he told me that he had consulted with his colleagues and felt that even though it would destroy the hearing on my left side, which he hated doing, the translabyrinthine surgical approach to my tumor removal was



my best option. This procedure offered the best chance to save the facial nerve which provides muscle control not only critical to facial expression, but also allows the flutist to form the correct mouth shape for creating a proper tone. His priorities made clear sense to me: he wanted first to save my life, second to save my facial nerve (which was compromised because my tumor was wrapped around it), and third my hearing. As a 19 year old musician, going forth with the "translab" procedure was a tough decision to make. Each time I spoke with Dr. Brackmann on the phone or visited him at the Clinic, I knew it was just as hard for him as it was for me to have my hearing destroyed.

It is definitely scary to be diagnosed with a tumor, but the tumor removal surgery was a success, and I'm thankful that I got the "translab" because my facial nerve was saved and I am able to smile and play the

It was this medical adventure that helped me pinpoint the career I was truly searching for: medicine.

flute. Every time I play I realize how lucky I am to be able to produce as beautiful a tone as before the tumor. As a musician, I now find the most challenging situations are ensemble playing. However, I've learned to orient myself by angling my chair or always having the group on my right side. Since the piano is on my right during a recital, it is lucky that I lost hearing on my left side. Dr. Brackmann and his wife Charlotte, who is a musician herself, attended my senior recital in Santa Barbara, for which I will always be grateful. I'll never forget Dr. Brackmann saying afterwards, "I was sure relieved to hear you hit that high note!"

It was this medical adventure that helped me pinpoint the career I was truly searching for: medicine. My experiences with everyone at the House Clinic left me with no question that as a patient I would be fine. My first-hand experience with the genuine compassion and first-rate professionalism of every person I met during my stay in Los Angeles ignited a desire to be "just like that." Dr. Brackmann and his surgical counselor, Rita Koechowski, made everlasting impressions on me with the care they gave me both medically and emotionally. Dr. Brackmann is not only a world-class surgeon who mended me, but as a

person and a physician he exemplifies what I want to accomplish in medicine: to be devoted, generous, gifted...he is the perfect role model.

As unusual as this sounds, my hope is for other patients with acoustic neuromas to be open to the myriad of positive outcomes a dramatic health challenge like this can have. I know I was extremely fortunate to have a superb doctor caring for me. It is vital to research all your options and find this kind of physician to perform your surgery. The Acoustic Neuroma Association (ANA) serves as an invaluable resource, and I'm now convinced that only the nicest people get ANs. At the ANA convention and during my stay at St. Vincent Medical Center post-surgery, I made lasting friendships with fellow AN patients.

I don't know how I knew this at age 19, but realizing that you will be okay is one of the most powerful tools in healing. Even though my ordeal was unexpected and frightening (especially for my parents), I received two priceless gifts: my career goals, and defined priorities in life. ❖

