Ben Carson Facts

**American doctor Ben Carson (born 1951) overcame poverty, racism, and a violent temper to become a world-renowned neurosurgeon.**

In 1987, neurosurgeon Ben Carson successfully performed an operation to separate Siamese twins who were born joined at the head. It was a milestone in neurosurgery, but was far from the only noteworthy achievement of Carson's career. He also performed ground-breaking surgery on a twin suffering from an abnormal expansion of the head. Carson was able to relieve the swelling and remove the surplus fluid-all while the unborn twin remained in its mother's uterus. This too was a first, and in other instances Carson has performed operations which have greatly expanded scientific knowledge of the brain and its functions. His "can-do" spirit, combined with his medical expertise, has made him the surgeon of choice for parents with children suffering rare neurological conditions.

If Carson seemed destined for any position when he was a child growing up on the streets of Detroit, he appeared most qualified for the role of putting someone else in the hospital-or even the morgue. In his profile on the American Academy of Achievement website, it was noted that Carson "had a temper so violent that he would attack other children, even his mother, at the slightest provocation." No doubt some of his anger stemmed from the conditions of his childhood. Carson's father left his mother, Sonya, when he was only eight; his mother, who had only a third-grade education, was faced with the daunting task of raising her sons Ben and Curtis by herself. She worked as a maid, sometimes holding two or even three jobs to support her family. The family was poor, and Carson often endured the cruel taunts of his classmates.

A further source of frustration in Carson's life was his poor performance as a student. During a two-year period when his family lived in Boston, he fell behind in his studies. By the time he returned to elementary school in Detroit, he was, according to his profile on the American Academy of Achievement website, "considered the 'dummy' of the class." It was a position for which he "had no competition," he related in his book *Gifted Hands.*

After Carson brought home a report card of failing grades, his mother quickly limited her sons' television viewing and required them to read two books a week. The boys then had to give written reports to their mother on what they read. While other children were outside playing, Sonya Carson forced her boys to stay inside and read, an act for which her friends criticized her, saying that her sons would grow up to hate her. Carson later realized that because of her own limited education, his mother often could not read her sons' reports, and was moved by her efforts to motivate them to a better life.

Before long, Carson moved from the bottom of the class to the top. However, there was resentment from his classmates at the predominantly white school. After awarding Carson a certificate of achievement at the end of his freshman year, a teacher berated his white classmates for letting an African-American student outshine them academically. In his high school years and later, Carson faced racism in a number of situations, but as he said in his 1996 interview with the American Academy of Achievement, "It's something that I haven't invested a great deal of energy in. My mother used to say, 'If you walk into an auditorium full of racist, bigoted people … you don't have a problem, they have a problem."'

Despite his academic improvement, Carson still had a violent temper. In his interview with the American Academy of Achievement, he recalled trying to hit his mother over the head with a hammer because of a disagreement over what clothes he should wear. In a dispute with a classmate over a locker, he cut a three-inch gash in the other boy's head. However, at the age of 14, Carson reached a turning point after he nearly stabbed a friend to death because the boy had changed the radio station.

Terrified by his own capacity for violence, he ran home and locked himself in the bathroom with the Bible. "I started praying," he said in his American Academy of Achievement interview, "and asking God to help me find a way to deal with this temper." Reading from the Book of Proverbs, he found numerous verses about anger, but the one that stood out to him was "Better a patient man than a warrior, a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city." After that, he realized he could control his anger, rather than it controlling him.

With his outstanding academic record, Carson was in demand among the nation's highest-ranking colleges and universities. He graduated at the top of his high school class and enrolled at Yale University. He had long been interested in psychology and, as he related in *Gifted Hands,* decided to become a doctor when he was eight-years-old and heard his pastor talk about the activities of medical missionaries. College would prove difficult, not just academically but financially, and in his book Carson credits God and a number of supportive people for helping him graduate successfully with his B.A. in 1973. He then enrolled in the School of Medicine at the University of Michigan.

Carson decided to become a neurosurgeon rather than a psychologist, and this would not be the only important decision at this juncture of his life. In 1975 he married Lacena Rustin whom he had met at Yale, and they eventually had three children. Carson earned his medical degree in 1977, and the young couple moved to Maryland, where he became a resident at Johns Hopkins University. By 1982 he was the chief resident in neurosurgery in Johns Hopkins. In his 1996 interview on the American Academy of Achievement website, Carson noted that being a young, African American made things different in the work setting. He recalled that in his early days as a surgeon, nurses would often mistake him for a hospital orderly, and speak to him as such. "I wouldn't get angry," he remembered. "I would simply say, 'Well, that's nice, but I'm Dr. Carson."' He continued, "I recognize[d] that the reason they said that was not necessarily because they were racist, but because from their perspective … the only black man they had ever seen on that ward with scrubs on was an orderly, so why should they think anything different?"

In 1983, Carson received an important invitation. Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital in Perth, Australia, needed a neurosurgeon, and they invited Carson to take the position. Initially resistant to the idea, as he related in *Gifted Hands,* the choice to go to Australia became one of the most significant of his career. The Carsons were deeply engaged in their life in Australia, and Lacena Carson, a classically-trained musician, was the first violinist in the Nedlands Symphony. For Ben Carson, his experience in Australia was invaluable, because it was a country without enough doctors with his training. He gained several years' worth of experience in a short time. "After several months," he wrote in *Gifted Hands,* "I realized that I had a special reason to thank God for leading us to Australia. In my one year there I got so much surgical experience that my skills were honed tremendously, and I felt remarkably capable and comfortable working on the brain."

Carson drew upon his previous experiences after he returned to Johns Hopkins in 1984. Shortly thereafter in 1985, and only in his early 30s, Carson became director of pediatric neurosurgery at Johns Hopkins Hospital. He faced several challenging cases, the first being four-year-old Maranda Francisco. Since the age of 18 months, the little girl had been having seizures, and by the time her parents brought her to Johns Hopkins, she was having more than 100 of them a day. In consultation with another doctor, Carson decided to take a radical step: a hemispherectomy, the removal of half the patient's brain. It was a risky procedure, as he told the girl's parents, but if they did nothing, Maranda would probably die. In *Gifted Hands* he described the painstaking surgery, which took more than eight hours and at the end of which the tearful Franciscos learned that their daughter would recover. Carson went on to perform numerous successful hemispherectomies, and only lost one patient; but that loss, of an 11-month-old, was devastating.

Carson described numerous other important operations in his book, *Gifted Hands,* but one which attracted international attention was the case of the Binder Siamese twins, Patrick and Benjamin. The Binders were born to German parents on February 2, 1987, and they were not merely twins: they were joined at the head. Ultimately the parents contacted Carson, who performed the 22-hour surgery on September 5 with a team of some 70 people. Although the twins would turn out to have some brain damage, both would survive the separation, making Carson's the first successful such operation. Part of its success owed to Carson's application of a technique he had seen used in cardiac surgery: by drastically cooling down the patients' bodies, he was able to stop the flow of blood. This ensured the patients' survival during the delicate period when he and the other surgeons were separating their blood vessels.

This type of surgery was in its developmental stages in the 1980s and early 1990s. When Carson and a surgical team of more than two dozen doctors performed a similar operation on the Makwaeba twins in South Africa in 1994, they were unsuccessful, and the twins died. Perhaps more representative of Carson's cases is the one chronicled in the July 1995 issue of *US News and World Report,* entitled "Matthew's Miracle." Matthew Anderson was five-years old when his parents learned that their son had a brain tumor. According to the article, right before the little boy was to begin radiation treatments, a friend recommended the autobiography of a brain surgeon "who thrived on cases that other doctors deemed hopeless." After the Andersons read *Gifted Hands,* they decided that they wanted Carson to operate on their son. Carson performed two surgeries, one in 1993, and one in 1995. Ultimately, Matthew Anderson recovered.

According to the *US News and World Report* article, Carson performs 500 operations a year, three times as many as most neurosurgeons, a fact for which he credits his "very, very efficient staff." He works with the music of Bach, Schubert, and other composers playing, "to keep me calm," he told the magazine. In 1994, *US News and World Report* rated Johns Hopkins Hospital the finest specialty institution in the country, ranking it above such highly respected hospitals as Mayo Clinic and Massachusetts General.

Because Carson's career has represented a triumph over circumstances, he has become a well-known inspirational writer and speaker. He is not short on advice for young people. In his 1996 American Academy of Achievement interview, he commented, "We don't need to be talking about Madonna, and Michael Jordan, and Michael Jackson. I don't have anything against these people, I really don't. But the fact of the matter is, that's not uplifting anybody. That's not creating the kind of society we want to create." He has noted that the most important thing is to bring value to the world through improving the lives of one's fellow human beings. Carson has done this through perseverance and example.

**How has Ben Carson contributed to the world of science?**