

**In Front, Almost
Always, Believe It Or
Not**

An Interview with Dr. Said Sayegh, August 2013

Interviewer: Dr. Sayegh, would you please tell me a bit about your life, and what you feel are the most important memories to you?

As a child, I was pampered a lot, because I was the first child, and the thing I remember very well was my mother; ever since I was a child, she wanted me to be a physician, a doctor. And in the school, primary and secondary school, I was first all the time, and had won all the awards by myself. And my tuition fees during the last four years at school were paid for because I was good in the Arabic language. My teachers in Arabic, I remember them very well until now; I think they are the best teachers. Probably the two of them are best teachers; one of them is definitely; he's a philosopher: Omar Faroukh, I don't know if you have heard about him. And the other's name is Suheil Idriss. Suheil Idriss is a writer. He wrote a book entitled "the dirty hands" and I was impressed by him and also by my language. I was actually the chief editor of Makassed Magazine in secondary school. I was editor and also used to write articles in the same magazine. These 2 Arabic teachers impressed me a lot, no doubt about that. This is why at the age of 17, I wrote a small book, "The Clean Hands." By the way, I have read all the big books of the Russian authors especially Tolstoy and all the big books in the Arab world like Ibn Khaldun and Ibn el Moukafaa etc...that's why my Arabic language is very strong. Suheil Idriss wrote "The Dirty Hands" I wrote "The Clean Hands," containing small stories, real stories. My uncle was an addict, I wrote about him, we were in Souk el Gharb, I used to walk at night. Also, when we were in Souk el Gharb, this is another small story in that book, I used to see a Palestinian girl, I remember her name was Lameess, I used to be attracted to her, and how she had dark skin. So I wrote a short story about how I like her and used to walk out at night to see her. These small stories are my life. That is what I saw and what I wrote, nothing was imaginary.

Now, to be a physician, this is a very interesting story. I want to be a physician. My father did not want me to be a physician. He wanted me to stay with him, here in Lebanon, and do something else, whatever it is, but not a physician. Why? I don't know. But he is a very smart man; he knew that I will not retreat from this, that I will do what I want and not what they want. What did I tell him? I wanted to go to Sorbonne; Suheil Idriss studied in Sorbonne, in Paris. What did he tell me? He said: "it's a simple matter. We make a deal. I do your passport, finish it for you, and give it to you, on condition that you do the entrance exam in USJ-FM (Université Saint-Joseph, Faculté de Médecine)." I agreed. He applied for me. I was not just on my way in pursuing medicine, but was amongst the first in class, 11 out of 70 students. I graduated with a Medical Degree from Université Saint-Joseph in 1963. Mahmoud Faour, my best friend, and I were asked by people in Barbir Hospital to come and be interns at their hospital. We were still in our third year of medicine! It was neither the 5th nor the 6th year! We learnt a lot from this experience, especially in the emergency room. So in addition to the 4 years of medical school, we had 3 years' experience as interns.

Now comes the specialization. We were approached by 2 doctors that were impressive: one is the owner of Sahel Hospital, Dr. Alameh; he is GU, Genitourinary doctor. Currently, the persons managing Sahel Hospital are Dr. Alameh's children. The other doctor was Youssef Itani; he's a surgeon. They advised us not to go to France but rather to America; at that time, I had a position in Nice, France to do Cardiology. We told them that we don't want because we only know the French language. They said that it was simple; they got us the Merck Manual, they got us an English teacher, he taught us for 2 months, we studied, and we passed the test! We were on our way to America and didn't know a word of English!

I went to a hospital that I will never forget: Washington Hospital Center in DC. Listen to this story. When did I arrive? July 4th. I went up to the room and I closed the door. Every while I used to get a telephone call, I would pick up the line but did not understand anything that was said on the other end. I would close the line. After some time, a security guard comes in, opens the door on me, and finds that the telephone has been removed. He said “what are you doing?” I said “I don’t know...what’s going on?” He said “you are on call.” Where? In the Emergency Room. With whom? With people of color. With people of color! You don’t know Washington DC?! I lived in DC. I love DC a lot. But many of them are people of color and it was very difficult to understand their language. In the Emergency Room, I used to depend mostly on the physical exam; not the history. So I used to take his temperature, and blood pressure, and listen to his heart. I used to understand a few words here and there, not because that their English is not good, but their speech is a bit skewed, it’s not straight forward. This I will never forget in my life, Washington DC when it was the 4th of July. I didn’t know what that date stood for: how could I know that?! It was the first time that I went to America.

Now there is another thing that I find interesting: Mahmoud Faour knew that I wanted to do Cardiology. He used to send me letters every time asking me if I will be upset if he did Cardiology, and always I used to reply back that “No, why should I be upset, you are free to do what you chose, and I will do what I chose.” And then he decided to do surgery; he went to a city hospital of Cleveland Ohio and he became one of the best general surgeons in Lebanon. He is now retired for health reasons mainly. I am his physician, he comes to my place and I medically treat him and everything.

So I wanted to specialize and I always loved Cardiology. I thought specializing in Cardiology was like in France, that from the beginning, you can do Cardiology. They told me “no, you have to do Internal Medicine first and then Cardiology.” So I went to Lahey Clinic, which was affiliated with Harvard, and passed most of the time in the Brigham hospital, Deaconess Hospital, and in the Cambridge City Hospital. And believe it or not, my son was born in the Brigham and Women Hospital! I cannot forget. During the 3 years of Internal Medicine, I liked Cardiology of course and worked a lot in it, but I also did everything else. I even did, believe it or not, 200 tubal ligations! Some of them as an assistant, some of them by myself. In DC, there were a lot of unwanted pregnancies.

Finally reaching my specialty, I wanted to do some clinical Cardiology, more than technical Cardiology. I went to Case Western Reserve University Hospital. There was a teacher, giant in his importance, his name was William Pritchard. He has written a book on circulation. This is the first in my life were a man, a physician taught me Cardiology on a one to one basis. He used to get me 3 times a week; I sat one hour with him to teach me! Where do you see this happening? Pritchard called Mason Sones and told him “take him!” “Take this fellow.” Mason F Sones, he was the first in the world to do coronary arteriography. I was one of his first 40 students at the Cleveland Clinic. I stayed in Cleveland Clinic 2 years. Mason Sones liked me very much, and I liked him. There is a picture of me and him in my clinic. I was the first and only one who helped Mason Sones.

So I finished at the end of '69; at the end of '69, Lebanon was very stable. So I came to Lebanon, I was the first one to do coronary arteriography in the whole of the Middle East. I went to Iraq, I went to Egypt, and I went to Syria, taking my 35mm film, and my catheter, to teach other cardiologists how to do coronary

arteriography. When people, or physicians, know that I am from Cleveland Clinic, they were impressed, because not just anybody can be accepted to Cleveland Clinic.

By the way, Mohamad, the Dean of AUB-MC, my brother, did the same rounds, but in the opposite direction; I sent Mohamad to Case Western reserve for his electives. And then he went to Cleveland Clinic to do Medicine, and then to Harvard for Nephrology. So he did it the other way around. He was one of the most famous researchers on organ transplant in the world and this is one of the reasons why he was accepted as the Dean of the Faculty of Medicine in Beirut Lebanon in 2009.

Now here, from the beginning, I don't want to sound haughty, and say "me, me" no, but from the beginning, I started getting a lot of patients, because they knew that I was coming from America, coming from Cleveland Clinic, etc...and I remember, that from the first month, I made money, more than any other doctor that was making money in the country. I even set my charges; I used to charge a higher fee than any other doctor. They even were asking for me from abroad. They asked for me to go to Iraq, they asked for me to go to Saudi Arabia, they asked for me to go to Syria, so I used to go. When I went to Saudi, they took me in a private jet, all by myself; I was alone in that plane! I transferred a patient from Jeddah to Riyadh, through my influence because I used to know someone in Riyadh who was one of my students. I called him and told him to take on this patient, because it was a CVA (cerebrovascular accident) not a cardiac problem.

So it is things like this that I remember, and can't forget. Later, in '87, I was appointed as chief of cardiology at the Lebanese University. I stayed for 13 years with them, and then I retired, because in the Lebanese law, you have to stop when

you are 64 years of age. I used to teach, hold meetings, and to put the curriculum of cardiology that is to be taught to students. I kept working and traveling a lot. Also, I was, the first Arab fellow of the American College of Cardiology, ACC, in '79. And I also was the first fellow for the Society of Cardiac Angiography and Intervention in 1980. They have given me certificates for all of them, that I am this and that. I felt very proud of myself!

Concerning my children, it wasn't me that told them to do Medicine. They have chosen to do Medicine. Said, my grandson, he is now 19 and is going to the university of Maryland by the end of this month. The other is Ramzi, he is 15, and in 2 or 3 years he will also be going to another university. Said is most probably going into Medicine. The other fellow, a very smart fellow, I don't know, we don't know yet.

To be honest, and with all humbleness, I was proud of myself, that I am a fairly good physician and I helped people; those that are poor, who cannot afford, I did not charge them like how I charged those that have money. And I have been a practicing physician from '69 till now! Till 6 months ago! I'm suffering from an unknown disease, mainly because of dyspnea (shortness of breath) and actually feel like I want to die right now because I want to go back to my career. This is my identity! I am understanding that I might not be able to go back to my practice and it is too much to bear. It's is a big loss for me...

I wrote 3 books in my life, one small book “the clean hands” when I was 17, and then 2 other books. One was about the human heart, and it won a big prize in Kuwait in '83. And, the third, believe it or not, this is not my specialty, but I wrote this book too, on AIDS!

***Interviewer: what made you write a book on a topic that is not your specialty?
Can you tell me about that?***

Yes, this is very important. Now, because they know me, you know the publishers, Dar el Zelem Lil Malayeen, who published my book on the heart, they asked me to write a book about AIDS when AIDS came about in the early 80's and people started talking about it. So I went and studied all the books on AIDS, reviewed all of them, and then I wrote the book. It took me 6 months. Because we had a war, there was a lot of free time to write. I used to work in my clinic office, by myself, and hand write in Arabic, because I don't know how to type in Arabic. And then we gave them to a certain teacher in the Arabic language for him to make corrections in case there were any mistakes, and then it was sent to the publisher for printing. They used to give me 15% from the revenue.

Interviewer: Dr. Sayegh, when did you feel most alive in your life?

This is a big word.

In my life, you can take any moment and say that I was living in it happily. But if I was to choose, it would be when they honored me recently in a conference. There was an Arab Lebanese Association for Medical Conference. Dr. Raafat from Tripoli, he's the electro physiologist at AUB, was the head of this committee at the Lebanese American Association for America. So they honored me and said that I was the first Arab to do coronary arteriography in the Middle East, and the first Arab fellow in the ACC, and the first Arab in the American College of Society

of Angiography and Intervention. Here, with this, I felt like I received a right of my rights.

The people who gave me my right concerning the fact that I was the first, most of them, 3 or 4 of them are in AUB. George Rbeiz, the father of Abdallah. There was also the first surgeon of AUB, I'm sure you've heard about him. And Fouad Jubran, who is now in Cleveland Clinic, he was here in Lebanon before.

There were other witnesses, like the owner of the Barbir Hospital. He believed in me because one of the physicians, a cardiologist, came once to the Cleveland Clinic where I was a fellow and witnessed a patient's case: she had Mitral Valve Stenosis and she fibrillated; we start pumping her. I took her down to the cardiac lab and I put a catheter in the right ventricle and I stimulated her with a higher rate, with a much higher rate, and she converted. She lived. And this actually was taken from an article I read, that this can be done. At that time, defibrillators had just arrived; by the way, every innovation happened during my time. The coronary care unit came about in Brigham Hospital during my time, in the early '60s. The pacemaker, the A/C defibrillator, the person who made it was a surgeon at the Case Western University. I was there. I was witness to all of this, and I kept teaching myself in order to always progress. And now I tell my students that medicine does not finish right now, it actually starts right now.

They were all witnesses that attested that I was the first; because on the other hand, there were other people that said no, that this other person was the first and that other person did it. I was always consistent and was not moved by the false claims. And I have documented it, up till now, on a GI X-ray: the 23rd of February, 1971. I used to do them on Saturdays, because the machine was in use during the weekdays. I also made a cradle, like a see-saw, so that it can turn the patient left

and right so I can take the positioning that I needed for the recovery of the result. It was a wooden cradle that I asked a carpenter to do.

Moreover, I felt alive when I traveled a lot. I have seen $\frac{3}{4}$ of the world; only China and Russia I haven't seen, but the States, Canada, and South America I know all of it. Also Thailand, Singapore, and East Asia; I enjoy everything in these journeys.

Interviewer: Dr. Sayegh, are there any other roles that you are proud of that you would like to mention?

Teaching: I taught first of all in Barbir, which is not a university hospital, but a lot of my friends that I actually know in the present, I taught them. One of my students was an Algerian, her name was Adhami. She came here to Lebanon and she married a Lebanese. She was guided to me by my life time friend, Mahmoud Faour, who told her to go and specialize: “go to Said el Sayegh, medical man, go and work with him.” She worked with me during the first year; she was very good, and used to also help me clinically sometimes. I was the first one to tell her to go and learn the latest mode of echocardiography. NB: When I applied to the American Board of Cardiology, they were just showing us the M Mode Echocardiography, it wasn't 2D. She came back and was the first one to do Echocardiography. AUB used to send us patients to Barbir for echocardiography and to place the Holter Monitor for the 24 hour EKG.

So teaching in Barbir, and then teaching at the Lebanese University, I was very, very, proud, you know, to be the head of the teaching committee. To be honest, I was the only one with enough degrees to be the head and to be a professor. The others were all French trained and did not have the necessary degrees.

There is one more thing. When I came back from America, and being the first to do coronary arteriography, I went to Hotel Dieu Hospital and applied: they did not take me. There was there, Pere Madet, the Dean. He was very nice with me and knows me from before, when I was a student. He forwarded my application to Hotel Dieu but they did not agree. This is also because...I will not say...but it still exists until now...unfortunately and sadly so.

Interviewer: are there any messages that you would like to say to specific people in your life?

The most important message: be up to date, for the professional, be up to date, don't stop learning, don't stop going and seeing new things and go and attend conferences and something like that. I think this is the most important message that I want to relay to people. And this works for every specialty. By the way, I have in mind to publish this interview/document, so that anybody who reads it can take, you know, messages, whatever messages he likes to take from these.

Concerning my son and daughter and the rest of my family, I would like to say to them that life is not easy, you have to fight, you have to be honest, and you have to be generous, and help people; that is very important. This way you will be appreciated more, and will be helped more etc... Also, you have to do what you like, what you love to do, because then you excel.

There is something else that I would like to share, as it has been remembered. We are 10 children in our family. I was the second child and the first boy; I have an older sister. So I was overindulged by my parents: Said, Said and Said...especially when I went to America, my mum used to mention me all the time: Said, Said, and Said, to an extent that, who got jealous? Mohamad, the Dean (my youngest brother). He was 4 years old when I left to the States. But mum,

during all my stay in the States, kept talking about me: Said, Said, Said...I want Said, I love Said etc...he came to Mama and told her: “Bring them all, bring all your children, return them to your abdomen, and deliver me as the first child!”