

Ben Carson

Author, Surgeon, Philanthropist (1951–)

“...I also came to realize that if people could make me angry they could control me. Why should I give someone else such power over my life?”—Ben Carson

Ben Carson was born in Detroit, Michigan, on September 18, 1951. His mother, though under-educated herself, pushed her sons to read and to believe in themselves. Carson went from being a poor student to receiving academic honors and eventually attending medical school. As a doctor, he became director of pediatric neurosurgery at Johns Hopkins Hospital at age 33 and earned fame for his groundbreaking work separating conjoined twins. In 2015 he announced that he was running for the following year's presidential election, hoping to gain the Republican nomination. He is one of the party's leading candidates in the polls.

Birth and Family Background

Benjamin Solomon Carson was born in Detroit, Michigan, on September 18, 1951, the second son of Sonya and Robert Solomon Carson. His mother was raised in Tennessee in a very large family and dropped out of school in the third grade. With limited prospects in life, she married Baptist minister and factory worker Robert Carson when she was 13. The couple moved to Detroit and had two children. But Sonya eventually discovered her husband was a bigamist and had another secret family. The two divorced, with Robert going to live with his other family and thus leaving Sonya and her children financially devastated.

Influential Mother

Ben was 8 and Curtis, his brother, was 10 when Sonya began to raise them as a single mother, reportedly moving to Boston to live with her sister for a time and eventually returning to Detroit. The family was very poor and to make ends meet Sonya sometimes toiled at two or three jobs simultaneously in order to provide for her boys. Most of the jobs she had was as a domestic worker.

As Carson later detailed in his autobiography, his mother was frugal with the family's finances, cleaning and patching clothes from the Goodwill in order to dress the boys. The family would also go to local farmers and offer to pick vegetables in exchange for a portion of the yield. Sonya would then can the produce for the kids' meals. Her actions, and the way she managed the family, proved to be a tremendous influence on Ben and Curtis.

Sonya also taught her boys that anything was possible. By his recollection many years later, Carson had thoughts of a career in medicine. Because his family was on medical assistance, they would have to wait for hours to be seen by one of the interns at hospitals in Boston or Detroit.

Ben would listen to the pulse of the hospital as doctors and nurses went about their routines, fantasizing that one day they'd be calling for a "Dr. Carson."

Power of Reading

Both Carson and his brother experienced difficulty in school. Ben fell to the bottom of his class and became the object of ridicule by his classmates. Determined to turn her sons around, Sonya limited their TV time to a few select programs and refused to let them go outside to play until they'd finished their homework.

She required them to read two library books a week and give her written reports, even though with her poor education, she could barely read them. At first, Ben resented the strict regimen, but after several weeks, he began to find enjoyment in reading, discovering he could go anywhere, be anybody and do anything between the covers of a book.

Ben began to learn how to use his imagination and found it more enjoyable than watching television. This attraction to reading soon led to a strong desire to learn more. Carson read literature on all types of subjects, seeing himself as the central character of what he was reading, even if it was a technical book or an encyclopedia.

Carson would later say that he began to view his prospects differently, that he could become the scientist or physician he had dreamed about, and thus, he cultivated an academic focus. A fifth grade science teacher was one of the first to encourage Carson's interests in lab work after the youngster was the only student able to identify an obsidian rock sample brought to school.

Within a year, Carson was amazing his teachers and classmates with his scholastic improvement. The children's books he read, while he was confined to quarters, now had true educational relevancy. He was able to recall facts and examples from his books at home and relate them to what he was learning in school.

Still, there were challenges. After Carson received a certificate of achievement in the eighth grade for being at the top of his class, a teacher openly berated his fellow white students for letting a black boy get ahead of them academically.

At Southwestern High School in inner-city Detroit, Carson's science teachers recognized his intellectual abilities and mentored him further. Other educators helped him to stay focused when outside influences pulled him off course.

Anger Issues

Despite his academic successes, Carson had a raging temper that translated into violent behavior as a child. In his autobiography, he stated that he once tried to hit his mother with a hammer because she disagreed with his choice of clothes. (His mother had in fact said in a 1988 *Detroit*

Free Press article that she was the one wielding the hammer, with other son Curtis intervening in the argument.) At another time, he claimed to have inflicted a head injury on a classmate in a dispute at his locker. In a final incident, Ben said he nearly stabbed a friend after arguing over a choice of radio stations.

According to Carson, the only thing that prevented a tragic event was the knife blade allegedly broke on the friend's belt buckle. Not knowing the extent of his friend's injury, Carson ran home and locked himself in the bathroom with a Bible. Terrified by his own actions, he started praying, asking God to help him find a way to deal with his temper, finding salvation in the Book of Proverbs. Carson began to realize that much of his anger stemmed from constantly putting himself in the center of events happening around him.

Burgeoning Surgical Career

Carson graduated with honors from Southwestern, having also become a senior commander in the school's ROTC program. He earned a full scholarship to Yale, receiving a B.A. degree in psychology in 1973.

Carson enrolled in the School of Medicine at the University of Michigan, choosing to become a neurosurgeon rather than a therapist. In 1975, he married Lacena "Candy" Rustin, whom he met at Yale. Carson earned his medical degree, and the young couple moved to Baltimore, Maryland, where he became an intern at Johns Hopkins University in 1977. His excellent eye-hand coordination and three-dimensional reasoning skills made him a superior surgeon early on. By 1982, he was chief resident in neurosurgery at Hopkins.

In 1983, Carson received an important invitation. Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital in Perth, Australia, needed a neurosurgeon and invited Carson to take the position. Resistant at first to move so far away from home, he eventually accepted the offer. It proved to be an important one. Australia at the time was lacking doctors with highly sophisticated training in neurosurgery. Carson gained several years worth of experience in the year he was at Gairdner Hospital and honed his skills tremendously.

Carson returned to Johns Hopkins in 1984 and, by 1985, he became director of pediatric neurosurgery at the age of 33, at the time, the youngest U.S. physician to hold such a position. In 1987, Carson attracted international attention by performing a surgery to separate 7-month-old occipital craniopagus twins in Germany. Patrick and Benjamin Binder were born joined at the head. Their parents contacted Carson, who went to Germany to consult with the family and the boys' doctors. Because the boys were joined at the back of the head, and because they had separate brains, he felt the operation could be performed successfully.

On September 4, 1987, after months of rehearsals, Carson and a huge team of doctors, nurses and support staff joined forces for what would be a 22-hour procedure. Part of the challenge in radical neurosurgery is to prevent severe bleeding and trauma to the patients. In the highly complex operation, Carson had applied both hypothermic and circulatory arrest. Although the twins did suffer some brain damage and post-operation bleeding, both survived the separation,

allowing Carson's surgery to be considered by the medical establishment the first successful procedure of its kind.

Separating Conjoined Twins

In 1994, Carson and his team went to South Africa to separate the Makwaeba twins. The operation was unsuccessful, as both girls died from complications of the surgery. Carson was devastated, but vowed to press on, as he knew such procedures could be successful. In 1997, Carson and his team went to Zambia in South Central Africa to separate infant boys Luka and Joseph Banda. This operation was especially difficult because the boys were joined at the tops of their heads, facing in opposite directions, making it the first time a surgery of this type had been performed. After a 28-hour operation, that was supported by previously rendered 3-D mapping, both boys survived and neither suffered brain damage.

Over time, Ben Carson's operations began to gain media attention. At first, what people saw was the soft-spoken hospital surgeon explaining complicated procedures in simple terms. But in time, Carson's own story became public—a troubled youth growing up in the inner city to a poor family eventually finding success.

Soon, Carson began traveling to schools, businesses and hospitals across the country telling his story and imparting his philosophy of life. Out of this dedication to education and helping young people, Carson and his wife founded the Carson Scholars Fund in 1994. The foundation grants scholarships to students and promotes reading in the younger grades.

Biggest Medical Challenge

In 2003, Ben Carson faced what was perhaps his biggest challenge: separating adult conjoined twins. Ladan and Laleh Bijani were Iranian women who were joined at the head. For 29 years, they had literally lived together in every conceivable way. Like normal twins, they shared experiences and outlooks, including earning law degrees, but as they got older and developed their own individual aspirations, they knew they could never lead independent lives unless they separated. As they told Carson at one point, "We would rather die than spend another day together."

This type of medical procedure had never been attempted on conjoined adults because of the dangerous outcomes. By this time, Carson had been conducting brain surgery for nearly 20 years and had performed several craniopagus separations. He later stated he tried to talk the two women out of the surgery, but after many discussions with them and consultations with many other doctors and surgeons, he agreed to proceed.

Carson and a team of more than 100 surgeons, specialists and assistants traveled to Singapore in Southeast Asia. On July 6, 2003, Carson and his team began the nearly 52-hour operation. They again relied on a 3-D imaging technique that Carson had utilized to prepare for the Banda twins' operation. The computerized images allowed the medical team to conduct a virtual surgery

before the operation. During the procedure, they followed digital reconstructions of the twins' brains.

The surgery revealed more difficulties outside of the girls' ages; their brains not only shared a major vein but had fused together. The separation was completed during the afternoon on July 8. But it was soon apparent that the girls were in deep critical condition.

At 2:30 p.m., Ladan died on the operating table. Her sister Laleh died a short time later. The loss was devastating to all, especially Carson, who stated that the the girls' bravery to pursue the operation had contributed to neurosurgery in ways that would live far beyond them.

Because of his unflagging dedication to children and his many medical breakthroughs, Carson has received a legion of honorary doctorate degrees and accolades, and has sat on the boards of numerous business and education boards.

Accolades and Books

In 2002, Carson was forced to cut back on his breakneck pace after developing prostate cancer. He took an active role in his own case, reviewing X-rays and consulting with the team of surgeons who operated on him. Carson fully recovered from the operation cancer-free. The brush with death caused him to adjust his life to spend more time with his wife and their three children, Murray, Benjamin Jr. and Rhoeyce.

After his recovery, Carson still kept a busy schedule, conducting operations and speaking to various groups around the country. He has also written several books, including the popular autobiography *Gifted Hands* (1990). Other titles include—*Think Big* (1992), *The Big Picture* (1999), and *Take the Risk* (2007)—are about his personal philosophies on learning, success, hard work and religious faith.

In 2000, the Library of Congress selected Carson as one of its "Living Legends." The following year, CNN and *Time* magazine named Carson as one of the nation's 20 foremost physicians and scientists. In 2006, he received the Spingarn Medal, the highest honor bestowed by the NAACP. In February 2008, President George W. Bush awarded Carson the Ford's Theatre Lincoln Medal and the Presidential Medal of Freedom. And in 2009, actor Cuba Gooding Jr. portrayed Carson in the TNT television production *Gifted Hands*.

Presidential Run

In recent years, Carson has focused more on politics than practicing medicine and eventually become known as an outspoken conservative Republican. In 2012, he published *America the Beautiful: Rediscovering What Made This Nation Great*. In February 2013, Carson attracted a lot of attention for his speech at the National Prayer Breakfast. He criticized President Barack Obama for his positions on taxation and healthcare. The following month he announced that he was officially retiring from his career as a surgeon. That October, he was hired by Fox News in

October 2013 to work as a contributor. Then in May 2014, Carson published his No. 1 *New York Times* bestseller *One Nation: What We Can All Do To Save America's Future*.

On May 4, 2015, Carson launched his official bid for the Republican presidential nomination at an event in Detroit. "I'm not a politician," Carson said. "I don't want to be a politician because politicians do what is politically expedient. I want to do what's right." With a crowded field of contenders, Carson was one of the ten top candidates who participated in a Fox News presidential debate in early August.

Over the ensuing months, Carson has risen through the ranks to become a leading contender among the nominees according to preliminary polls against outspoken rival Donald Trump and seen as a favorite among evangelicals. (Carson is a Seventh Day Adventist.) In October he also released another book, *A More Perfect Union*.

Since Carson began his presidential campaign, several news sources have questioned statements he's made about his background in *Gifted Hands*. Having asserted in the book that he was granted a full scholarship for admission to West Point, news magazine *Politico* reported that Carson had never applied to the military academy, which his team confirmed. There have also been questions concerning the accuracy of his statements about being a violent youngster, with CNN conducting an investigation into Carson's school days and life in his old neighborhood.