

IRVING CHAIS

Irving Chais is the owner of the New York Doll Hospital on Lexington Avenue. Founded in 1900, it inspired the name of the punk band the New York Dolls. He lives in Manhattan near his ex-wife, Rose, daughters, Alison and Dana, and grandchildren, Lily and Jonathan, 2.

I usually get up at 4.30. I take a shower and shave, and I put a robe on, very comfortable. Then I make cereal with skimmed milk, and I love walnuts and sliced bananas and any fresh fruit in season — peaches, plums, apples. Then I put on slacks and a warm shirt. I live on 57th and First, a few blocks from the hospital.

I didn't plan on going into this business. I helped my parents out before I was drafted in 1943, but when I came out in 1946 I didn't want to be a doll doctor. My father became ill and my mother asked me to help. After a while it got into my blood, and I've been here ever since. I love meeting people, I love my work. I'm mechanically inclined, I'm very artistic, and I happen to be an extremely charming person. I have a lot of assets. No liabilities, all assets.

In the morning I go to the gym. There's an Olympic-size pool which I indulge in. I work out until about 8, and meet some fellow business people. We talk, we schmooze; I might have a java with a cookie, and proceed from there. I arrive at 9.30. First thing, I read the New York Times from front to back. You have to have knowledge. Knowledge is power.

A customer can come in with a bag with just a doll's arm sticking out, and I'll tell you the name of the doll, what it's made of, who made it, how old it is, and how much it's worth. People say: "How do you know?" It's 60 years. If I don't know by now, when am I going to learn? When I'm 300? I'll be 80 in August. And I feel great. Of course, there are three things that tell you you're getting on. First thing is your memory starts to slip. The other two I've forgotten completely.

My father used to tell me: "This is the way to re-string this doll." I'd say: "Pop, 45 minutes to re-string a doll? Isn't there a shorter way?" No. Okay, I did it his way. But when he passed away, I took his way,



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and did it in 25 minutes, then 12, then 6. Anything made by man can be restored by man. I've worked on Egyptian dolls from about 5000BC. Museums sent them to me. Very tiny, about 6in, and the outsides were painted with gold. Some parts didn't fit right so you got to rebuild the insides. That's delicate work.

I might call out for lunch, maybe soup. I don't go in for these fancy soups, like clam chowder. I like vegetable. That's why I'm in such wonderful health. A few years ago I had a septuple-bypass. But my two wonderful daughters, Alison and Dana, and my ex-wife, Rose, watched over me, so I'm still here. But it's also because I am a positive thinker. I expect to be around for quite some time!

In the afternoon people come and go. Celebrities come in, but I don't know till afterwards. Bruce Springsteen. Dustin

Hoffman with his children. Hoffman I know, but I don't go to movies. I like to read. I don't like non-fiction, because nowadays these stories that are true, they're ridiculous! Multiple murderers, people who should be under the care of a psychiatrist. These stories are out of line. I happen to be a very intelligent person; you realise that, of course.

Once a woman sent an 1850 papier-mâché doll's body in about 30 pieces. It was like eggshell. She sent me \$800 to have it restored. When the cheque didn't bounce I thought: "What am I, crazy? I don't even know how I'll do it!" One day in the shower, suddenly the bulb lit, and I knew. The body was hollow. I cut it in half and smeared an epoxy resin inside. It dries like steel. I cemented it together, then I filled in the irregular areas: the hills, the dales, the holes, the crevices.

Then three coats of paint and it was perfect. She'd sent it to several people in the US and nobody could fix it. But the New York Doll Hospital did it.

After closing up the shop, I usually meet my ex-wife for dinner at Meltemi's. Tonight I'll see my grandchildren. A boy and a girl — they're delicious. You should see how gorgeous. Meltemi's is a little Greek restaurant on First Avenue and 50th. Striped bass and halibut and swordfish and sole. My God, they got all kinds of fish, and fresh! You can look at the eyes, they're clear — I'm a fish eater.

I spent most of my life here in New York. With the dollies. But in 1944 I was in London with the US Army. I drove out to the countryside with a British girl one afternoon. It was gorgeous, but there was an area on the horizon with little black specks. We were discussing where to go to dinner, but I kept looking at the sky, and the specks kept getting bigger. Finally, they flew over us, and it was the Luftwaffe. Coming to bomb London. Gives me the shivers to remember it. We jumped in the jeep and drove back to London — but not that fast. Who wants to hurry to an area that's being bombed? I was billeted at the Hotel Cumberland. They hit two blocks away. The smoke, the sirens, people running, screaming. then I "enjoyed" Normandy and spent some time in France and Germany. My

service career was not very pleasant.

When I leave here at night, I lock the door, that's it. The dolls aren't on my mind any more. I go home, relax, take a shower, get a little supper in. I like Fusha Restaurant on 58th. Their salmon steak in a red sauce is absolutely scrumptious. I like meat, too — T-bone or porterhouse. Of course, good quality. I don't look for price, I look for quality. I'll watch TV, the local news and news from abroad, and then I'll fall asleep very easily. There's no problem falling asleep. I don't think of anything when I get into bed. My mind is absolutely clear, clear and free as a bird.

**Interview: Dana Burnell.
Photograph: Emma Blau**