

Ophthalmologist follows in his father's footsteps

BY MELINDA GREENE

CLEARWATER – Dr. Pit Gills is not one to rest on family laurels.

He's the high-achieving ophthalmologist and surgeon who has followed in his father's footsteps, Dr. James Gills, the founder and owner of St. Luke's Cataract Institute with offices in Pinellas County and beyond.

While there are two other sizable St. Luke clinic sites in Pinellas County, Gills, 43, a Clearwater resident, said he was seeking to branch out and establish a presence in the downtown area where none had existed and create St. Luke's Cataract & Laser Institute for Ophthalmology and Eye Surgery and Reflections, a full-service clinic in spa-like surroundings for those patients who live in the mid-Pinellas area.

The opportunity to make it all possible stood, conveniently enough, at the corner of Fort Harrison and Court Street in the form of a pink (albeit badly faded) lady that had housed Webb's Gentleman's Apparel – a building partially vacant and ripe for a new lease on life.

The storefront clothing shop had opened in 1952. As a business, it flourished for many years becoming something of a landmark before closing in 2008, a victim of changing tastes and the advent of malls with acres of free parking.

For a few years, thereafter, the owner leased out space to law and real-estate offices

Gills eventually purchased the building including an adjacent one for parking. A major three-year renovation process ensued.

"What was exciting was that the Webb building is historic and has been in Clearwater since I can remember. You can't come off the beach without going by it," Gills added.

The languishing structure that had seen better days was transformed into a striking Art Deco-style façade painted a Caribbean pink with white trim, black shutters and zebra-striped awnings plus a big white clock affixed at the high corner of the building facing the street.

Every inch of the 14,000-square-foot, two-story building site received attention. A spa designer from California was even brought on board.

But the person he said proved most instrumental was his wife, Joy, an artist by training. It was thanks to her due diligence the building's exterior is now that perfect shade of pink that gave the building its wow factor many years ago.

"My wife orchestrated everything and picked everything out down to the doorknobs," Gills said then adds, "with the exception of me, she has exceptional taste. ... She dug underneath the ground to find the original color that hadn't been bleached by sun," Gills said. "Hyman Webb (the building's owner) told us 'I tried for years to get that color.'"

"We tried to keep the historic look to it by adding the roof to it and adding the clock to it, but more than the looks, I'm excited about the functionality of it where we could build a satellite office and offer all the up-to-date lasers. ...



Dr. Pit Gills

It's great care for the patients."

The facility had its grand opening in January of this year.

The first floor of the building houses LASIK surgery and treatments for glaucoma and cataracts.

On the second floor, however, is something new that Gills has implemented. Reflections at St. Luke's, as it is called, cater to patients seeking cosmetic, reconstructive and plastic surgery as well as dermatologic services and procedures.

The various medical specialists who practice at the site have all been culled personally by Gills.

The first of the family's chain of clinics opened in 1968 by Gills's father who was and still is in Tarpon Springs. There are now a total of six surgical sites including St. Petersburg, Tampa, Spring Hill and Bayonet Point.

Gills and his wife, Joy, have three children, Pitzer, Parker, and Stokes.

The Gills family is also active in many secular charities and religious groups here and abroad. "We do most of it anonymously. I don't like putting my name on things," he said.

Among the recipients of the Gills' largesse is Calvary High School, a private Christian school in Clearwater, that Gills says he greatly admires.

Indeed, he and his wife, Joy, helped fund the school's first football field and athletic facility including a 9,000-square-foot field house completed in 2011.

The building boasts a 3,000-square-foot weight room and conditioning equipment.

Gills said he is also involved with the Fort Myers-based organization, ECHO, similar in function to the Peace Corps.

"It's a great organization," he said, which trains interns to serve in rural and impoverished areas around the globe teaching communities how to farm using sustainable, off-the-grid methods.

Pamela Adkins, St. Luke's director of communications, describes Gills as extremely modest when it comes to all of his charitable endeavors.

"He believes that if you have to talk about it, it takes away from the meaning of it," she said, adding with a laugh, "It drives me crazy sometimes."



Photo courtesy of CHARITY HENDRY

Shown is St. Luke's Cataract & Laser Institute for Ophthalmology and Eye Surgery and Reflections, a full-service clinic in spa-like surroundings in Clearwater for those patients who live in the mid-Pinellas area.

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