

# Los Angeles Times

Joel Stein:

## The Eye Man Who Made Me Feel Girlie Inside

Journalists are fascinated by how much celebrities like free stuff. That's because the only people who like free stuff more than celebrities are journalists. Unfortunately, the Los Angeles Times has rules against accepting gifts. I wish I'd known that before I took this gig. Still, you'd think that there'd be some things no one would take just because they're free. Such as medical care.

Yet people successful enough to be presenters at awards shows are indeed getting laser eye surgery just because a coupon was in a gift bag between the Wonderbra and the universal remote control.

For the last year, a nontransferable coupon for Lasik surgery has been included in goodie bags at awards shows including the Oscars, Grammys, Emmys, ESPYs and even the Kids' Choice Awards. Apparently, staring at Yu-Gi-Oh trading cards can really mess your eyes up.

Dr. Kerry Assil, a Los Angeles ophthalmologist, was approached by Distinctive Assets, one of the city's goodie-bag makers. After some persuading, he decided it was a good marketing and referral opportunity to give away the \$5,600 surgery.

"Normal people would be afraid to take free Lasik," says Lash Fary, the owner of Distinctive Assets, which is giving out a gift bag worth \$28,944.95 at the Grammys on Feb. 13.

"But celebrities are used to saying, 'I'm Sharon Stone. Can I get a discount?' " Proving there is no need for tact in Hollywood, Fary included in this year's Grammy bag a \$1,000 gift certificate to a plastic surgeon. Meg Ryan undoubtedly used hers for a tip.

Blair Underwood got the certificate in two gift bags before getting the surgery. He had his kids — 7, 6 and 3 — take the day off school to watch the surgery. This didn't gross them out, partly because it's a 10-minute bloodless operation, and because the older two had seen their youngest sibling's birth. I'm sure they can't wait until Dad passes a kidney stone.

On average, out of 100 bags given out at an awards show, two celebrities make the trip to Assil's office. They've included Kelly Clarkson, Ricki Lake, NBA players Rip Hamilton and John Salley, Ben McKenzie from "The OC" and members of Linkin Park and Hoobastank. Assil's referral plan worked with most of them: Clarkson bought surgeries for her sister and brother, and Salley referred Tom Arnold, who nevertheless wears glasses on TV, probably to try to look smart. I'm thinking it wouldn't help Arnold if he wore a mortar board and two Stephen Hawkings.

On awards night and at auditions the day before, celebrities walk through a lounge where the companies providing the goodies explain their wares. That means some poor schlep from Assil's office has to spend two 12-hour days standing next to a Punkz dolls salesman, trying to explain cornea reshaping to Hoobastank. Though I feel worse for the universal remote control guy.

I went to Assil's office in Santa Monica to find out what kind of treatment the celebrities get. The place looks like the Mondrian with even hotter employees. It is plastered with more signed head shots than a dry cleaners: Brad Pitt, Sylvester Stallone, Terrell Owens, Tiger Woods, Lorenzo Lamas and one of the women he was once married to.

Wrote Courtney Cox: "Dr. Assil, You have given me the greatest gift besides, of course, my parents, Thank you." If that doesn't say all you need to know about David Arquette, then rent "Eight-Legged Freaks."

After I filled out some forms I was put in a room that looked like an exam room but turned out to be more of a screening room. Like everyone in L.A., Assil has a reel. An assistant comes in, dims the lights and makes patients watch all 20 minutes of clips from his appearances on shows such as "Good Morning America" and testimonials from celebrities. The powerful voice-over and soft jazz made me want to have someone shoot a laser beam into my eyeball.

Then a nurse came by and used a series of really impressive computerized things to measure my eyes. She told me, in a manner that implied more than a simply professional relationship, that I have "nice, thick corneas." Like many of the people who worked there, she too had nice, thick corneas, by which I mean large breasts. Assil came by and told me my surgery would be "a slam-dunk." He was smart and confident and darkly handsome and made me feel all girlie inside. Not only would Lasik allow me to get rid of my glasses and probably let me see better, but I'd get to be around Assil a lot more. Though I came to mock the celebrities who decide to get surgery from a gift bag, I think all those pictures of Courtney Cox wound up working on me. I think I may lose \$5,600 on this column.