Twelve years ago, Dr. James St. Ville experienced the satisfaction of helping patients who could not pay for his services.

A 1984 graduate of the University of Oklahoma College of Medicine, St. Ville trained as an orthopedic surgery resident at Baltimore’s Johns Hopkins Hospital. Frequently, he operated on indigents. He never forgot their gratitude, especially those who regained the use of limbs after joint replacement.

Today St. Ville’s caring attitude has led to healthier lives for over 150 former National Football League players. His patients are not the superstars with mega-buck contracts, whose corrective surgeries make headlines, but rather their predecessors, who labored for less and paid with life-altering injuries.

St. Ville’s professional focus changed in 1991 when Ron Gardin, former Baltimore Colt defensive back, visited St. Ville’s office in Phoenix, Arizona.

“Ron needed treatment for a sore elbow, the 40-year-old St. Ville explains. “He’s active in the NFL Players Association, and he mentioned that, like himself, many retired players lacked health insurance or couldn’t get coverage for damage done during their football careers. Those injuries were classified as pre-existing conditions. With joint-replacement surgery costing $30,000 to $40,000, many athletes who played before the big salary days had to live with pain."

St. Ville and Gardin recognized a need. With the cooperation and encouragement of the NFL Players Association, they visited hospitals and medical supply companies, seeking donations of facilities and products to help the former players.

They found rough going.

“For 18 months we tried unsuccessfully to get help from the boards of medical supply companies,” St. Ville says. “We pointed out they were shipping products overseas for worthy causes. Why not donate to a good cause here at home? Finally, Gardin’s reputation as a former University of Arizona All-American helped. Well-known and respected in the state, he began making progress with the companies. Then I got a break. Dr. Tom Cerato, chief-of-staff at Phoenix General, agreed to donate the hospital’s surgical facilities. After these breakthroughs, we began the NFL Charity Surgery Program.”

As St. Ville and the NFLPA found other physicians across the country willing to participate, he expanded the program to treat former players from other sports, including professional baseball and hockey. Donated services have exceeded $2.5 million thus far. Now patients can receive treatments for other medical problems as well. Those suffering prostate problems, for example, are being treated at a hospital in Indianapolis.

St. Ville was an All-State running back at Tulsa’s Casia Hall High School in the 1970s and a rugby player during his medical school days. OU Regent Robin Siegfried remembers St. Ville as a classmate at Casia Hall.

“I’ve known Jim for over 25 years as a conscientious, intelligent person who was an outstanding athlete,” Siegfried says. “When he sets a goal, he achieves it. Having followed his educational and medical careers, I know that he is ahead of his time. People like Jim St. Ville make a positive difference in creating a better future for all. I am proud that he is an OU graduate.”

St. Ville’s background in football and rugby has given him first-hand knowledge of athletic injury. He had knee ligament surgery. Now, when he helps a patient he empathizes with their pain.

“Walt Sweeney was a 14-year veteran and all-pro for the San Diego Chargers,” St. Ville says. “As a result of multiple knee injuries, his foot pointed 90 degrees off-line. He dislocated his knee with every step. Sweeney couldn’t qualify for insurance, so he lived with the problem for 10 years. To cope with pain, he resorted to drugs and became addicted. I performed a difficult but successful knee surgery. Afterwards Walt felt so encouraged that he checked into a detox center. A year later he was drug-free.

“I’ll never forget that case,” St. Ville says, “because I helped Sweeney not only to walk again but also to improve
his life. I've had other patients who cried when they walked normally again. Their stories make it worthwhile to overcome the bureaucratic obstacles physicians face in practicing medicine today. I can reach out and touch the heart of someone in need.

St. Ville is working toward a $10 million endowment fund for medical treatment of retired professional athletes. As time permits, he and other concerned health care professionals have approached corporations and the NFL Players Association for funds. He considers that endeavor "work in progress."

The Boston native has never forgotten his Oklahoma ties. He met OU Executive Associate Athletic Director Larry Naifeh while playing rugby during his medical school days, and they remain friends. "I try to make it back for two or three Sooner football games every year," St. Ville says.

Naifeh remembers St. Ville's role in the success of OU's rugby team in the early 1980s. The team won four consecutive Ozark Conference championships and twice advanced both to the National Rugby Championship Sweet Sixteen and the Final Eight.

"Jim was incredibly competitive and dedicated athletically and academically," Naifeh says. "When we traveled, Jim always brought his books and studied. Among rugby players, this was considered unique. His success in the medical profession comes as no surprise to his teammates. After 20 years of playing rugby, I expect that Jim eventually will become my doctor as well as my former teammate."

The fourth of seven children of a surgeon and a homemaker, St. Ville never married. He fly-fishes, scuba dives and serves as medical director of the U.S.A. Rugby Football Union. He runs and bikes in training for a biathlon.

In 1989 St. Ville moved from Baltimore to Phoenix because of the quality of life and the city's growing retiree population. He knew many of those people would need joint replacement surgery.

St. Ville, who also received a master's degree in bioengineering, will continue to apply that earlier training in the future.

"I'll continue specializing in artificial joint surgery, but I want to explore alternatives for younger athletes," he says, citing the increasing number of implants needed by younger people. "Implants wear out over time. I plan to conduct research on synthetic materials that may last longer."

St. Ville feels one void in his career. "I miss teaching at Johns Hopkins," he says. "We don't have a medical school in Phoenix, and I really enjoy helping future physicians."

That void might be filled. Johns Hopkins has contacted St. Ville about teaching courses through telecommunication.

Perhaps St. Ville's "return" to his Baltimore classroom will instill in another generation of medical students the knowledge and care that have touched so many lives.

—Robert Ferrier