



JIMMY FRANK HOWELL, M.D.

September 10, 1932 – December 22, 2014

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Dr. Jimmy Frank Howell died quietly and peacefully on Monday, December 22, 2014, at the age of 82. He was born in Winnfield, Louisiana, to Burley DeSoto Howell and Maggie Penola Howell and was preceded in death by his parents and his sister, Billie June Howell Murphy. His wife, Roberta Blankenstein Howell, survives as do six children, thirteen grandchildren, and three great grandchildren.

Dr. Howell graduated at the top of his class from Baylor Medical School in 1958 and was thereafter never less than “best in class” at everything he did. He remained an active member of the Baylor faculty as a professor of surgery until his death. After completing his general surgical residency program in 1962, he remained at Baylor for a year of thoracic surgery training under the guidance of Drs. DeBakey, Cooley, Crawford, Morris, and others. He then joined Dr. Stanley Crawford at the Baylor College of Medicine Department of Surgery before starting his own practice. His particular interest was in vascular surgery, and he served for many years as director of the Vascular Surgery Training Program at Baylor and Houston Methodist Hospital. This, combined with his interest in ischemic heart disease, led to the first successful coronary artery bypass performed by Drs. Howell and Edward Garrett in 1964. This event was not published until 7 years later, when the patient returned for follow-up and a coronary angiogram demonstrated a widely patent vein graft from the aorta to the left anterior descending artery. In the years to come, Dr. Howell would be recognized as one of the world’s most accomplished cardiovascular surgeons. He continued operating until 2 years before his death, when an accident caused the loss of vision in one eye. After that, he continued to provide counsel to patients and colleagues until his death.

Over the course of his career, it is estimated that Dr. Howell performed more than 60,000 surgical procedures, 30,000 of them being in the cardiovascular area. He was not the kind to write scientific papers; he let others do that. Rather, recognizing his talent, he perfected his skills in the operating room by working 12-, 14-, even 16-hour days. Weekends were never a sanctuary for him. His records were so complete that we were able to publish the first 40 years of his cardiovascular accomplishments encompassing nearly 30,000 patients and procedures from 1964 through 2004 in this journal (Vol. 7, No. 1). From day one, his statistics for

morbidity and mortality were better than any benchmark ever published. In 2014, the Jimmy Frank Howell Distinguished Chair in Cardiovascular Surgery was established in the Department of Cardiovascular Surgery at Houston Methodist Hospital. His professional activities led to the opening of another chapter in his life: the oil and gas business with Joe Walter, founder of Walter Oil & Gas Corporation. He and Joe Walter became close friends and business associates, and it is said that Dr. Howell was able to analyze an oil well property as well as anyone.

The other love of his life was his wife, Roberta. They enjoyed nearly 60 years of marriage and raised six children. Roberta often was seen at Houston Methodist Hospital bringing him lunch, and even dinner on occasion. His colleagues often marveled at how they supported each other. As a couple, they loved to dance; he reminded me of a high-stepping Tennessee walker as he moved across the dance floor with Roberta, magnificently matching him step for step.

Dr. Howell loved the outdoors and spent as many hours as he could on his beloved ranch in Liberty, Texas. His friends swore that he could operate a bulldozer with the best. He loved to hunt and fish with his friends and often with patients. His travels took him to Africa for big-game hunting; to Georgia, South Texas, California, and the Methodist Hospital Duck Lodge for duck, goose, and quail hunting. He was a deadly wing shooter. His fishing sorties included trips to Galveston Bay, the Rocky Mountains, and the rivers of Alaska for trout and salmon. Not long before his death, we two pondered how we could get back to Alaska, never admitting to ourselves that neither of us was up to the trek.

In 2012, a celebration was held to honor Dr. Howell’s 50 years at Baylor and Houston Methodist Hospital and his 80th birthday. More people showed than there was room for, and additional rooms had to be recruited. For several hours, friends, patients, and colleagues spun tales of his prowess in and outside of medicine. Dr. Howell sat quietly for a while, then found himself alternately splitting his sides in between tears. It was a night he was never to forget.

In a way, he lived a charmed life, and in doing so made a better life possible for many hundreds of people. Upon his passing, one of my sons remarked, “Now he is in the big operating room in the sky, where we’ll all find him one day: operating on angels.”