

Beginning in this issue, we will publish letters from colleagues, friends and patients of Dr. Michael E. DeBakey, sent to us spontaneously or on request, portraying the unique influence of his persona on so many people of diverse origins and walks of life. From kings and queens to the poorest of souls, to those his message was simple: "I can and will help." To his students, "shape up and do it right or don't do it at all," delivered in varying degrees of honey and steel. For years to come, we will learn from him and about him by what people remember.

- William L. Winters Jr., M.D., Editor-in-Chief, Journal of the Methodist DeBakey Heart & Vascular Center

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON DR. MICHAEL E. DEBAKEY

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The halls of The Methodist Hospital in Houston are not the same since the passing of Dr. Michael E. DeBakey on July 11, 2008.

In 1954, I arrived in Houston to begin residency training in surgery at Baylor College of Medicine. That was the beginning of a 54-year professional relationship with one of the century's greatest professors of surgery.

From this experience, I learned much about the man and of his skills, yet finding the words that do justice to his memory is extremely difficult. So, I am sharing some incidents that help characterize the man and that have been most memorable to me.

Michael DeBakey was not only dedicated but wedded to the medical profession. He loved his patients, and he was severely affected whenever he was unable to solve their problems or when they did not do well after surgery. When not operating, he was either traveling, at the office, or at home working.

One Sunday morning I walked into the surgical offices at Baylor. He was seated at his large, cluttered, oval desk. We were alone in the building.

"Where is everyone?" he asked.

"Dr. DeBakey, it's Sunday," I replied. "I suppose they are in church."

"Why are they not here doing the Lord's work?" he responded.

Medicine was his calling, the ultimate important profession, the "Lord's work." There was much to be done,

no room for error or excuse, and not enough available time.

His military background contributed much to his daily discipline and, on occasion, came to the forefront. Once, after I treated a wounded narcotics officer, I had been given a .45 Colt Commander automatic pistol. On my way out that day, I mentioned the gift to Dr. DeBakey. He took the weapon, disassembled it like a drill sergeant, and rapidly put it back together, remarking approvingly, "Fine gun." Those hands of his were certainly connected to his nervous system!

He was very supportive of and engaged in surgical research and expected his colleagues also to participate. From these efforts came new operations, new tools and materials, and new devices. His imaginations led to inventions, and his Baylor machinists could bring those ideas to reality.

He practiced at one of the best times in medicine, pressing on with patient care and never worrying about the business aspect of surgery. During rounds one day, while examining a school teacher/patient who was expressing concern over potential charges, he remarked, "[I don't charge preachers, nurses, or school teachers." And his fees were low. Young surgeons frequently complained that he kept the regional fee profile too low.

We wrote many papers together. Our last effort was published just one

week before his death. This work was begun before his aortic dissection and completed after his recovery. At almost 100 years of age, his body was frail but his mind remained strong. He took pleasure in reviewing the 50-year history of coronary artery surgery at Baylor and Methodist and its culmination in the Methodist DeBakey Heart & Vascular Center.

At times our discussions turned from the paper to family, current medical problems, and the future direction of cardiac surgery. To the very end he was looking ahead.

Many of his peers failed to see the human side of this great physician, and their loss was unfortunate. The depth of his compassion was great. He is deeply missed.