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TRIBUTE TO DR. MICHAEL E. DEBAKEY

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The weekend after Dr. Michael E. DeBakey died, one medical historian described him as the greatest physician of the 20th century. I consider him to be one of the most influential physicians since Galen, a Greek physician born in the Roman Empire in the 2nd century A.D. Galen was so influential that his theories were accepted as dogma in western medical science for over 1,000 years. I would like to think that Dr. DeBakey will still be remembered a thousand years from now.

The son of Lebanese immigrants to the United States, Dr. DeBakey was an internationally renowned pioneer in the treatment and prevention of cardiovascular disease. His accomplishments in medical science would fill an entire book. His research was published in more than 1,000 papers. His contributions as a medical statesman are unparalleled — from helping to start the government-administered health insurance program (Medicare) in the United States, to promoting the establishment of the National Library of Medicine, to consulting on the heart operation of Boris Yeltsin — and the list goes on. I had the opportunity to travel many places with him, and whether it was Turkey, China, or Russia, he was approached by people who thanked him for saving or extending the life of a spouse, child, or loved one. Dr. DeBakey treated the rich, the famous, and the powerful, and he treated the poor and humble. He treated all of his patients with the same dedication to the relief of human pain and suffering.

His influence was truly global and continues to touch people, even in Qatar. A number of years ago, he started the DeBakey High School for Health Professions in Houston, Texas. A couple of days after he died, I received a copy of the *Gulf Times*. It contained an advertisement for a new program started by the Qatar Foundation. The advertisement read, “DeBakey High School for Health Professions at Qatar is now accepting student applications.” I think it is amazing that his

influence continues to span the globe in this way, and that it connects his Middle Eastern heritage with his illustrious career in the United States.

What set Dr. DeBakey apart from so many others in our field was his basic humanity. There was a period of years when Houston was the mecca of cardiovascular surgery. I remember when the Duke of Windsor said he came to Houston to see “the maestro.” I spoke recently with a prominent cardiologist in New York who would send all of his difficult surgical cases to Dr. DeBakey. Not a single time did Dr. DeBakey ever ask, “Can this patient pay? Does he have insurance? Is he on Medicare? Is he a VIP?” He would take one and all, regardless of whom they were. I observed him treat a poor patient with no source of funds with the same attention and respect that he gave to a head of state.

I would like to share a personal experience. One of my daughters was hospitalized scores of times during her high school years. When he was in town, Dr. DeBakey never missed a day visiting her in her room. And some days, this was the only time that her face would brighten up, and she would become animated. One day when he visited, my wife, Anita, was sewing a prom dress for one of our daughter’s friends whose mother was ill.

Dr. DeBakey said, “Anita, what are you doing?”

My wife told him, and he said, “Let me see your stitches.” He examined the dress and said, “These are your basting stitches, aren’t they?”

She said, “No, Dr. DeBakey, these are my finishing stitches.”

“These are terrible,” he said. “Let me have your scissors!”

He ripped out every single stitch and said, “Let me have your needle and thread.” He proceeded to re sew the dress in its entirety while my wife sat there in a state of astonishment.

Fast-forward 15 years later. Dr. DeBakey was having a New Year's Eve dinner at our home in Houston. My wife cooked gumbo, a kind of stew from Louisiana that she knew he loved. And, of course, Dr. DeBakey never forgot anything. He told her, "Anita, you may not be able to sew, but you sure cook good gumbo."

I cannot begin to describe the impact of Dr. DeBakey's influence on my own career. When I told

him I was moving to New York at age 60, he said, "No one will miss you more than I will, but you have to go where you can accomplish the most. You know you have another 35 or 40 years of work ahead of you."

In summing up my feelings about Dr. DeBakey, I would include awe, admiration, inspiration and love. I will remember him as a man of great kindness and extraordinary ability.

Typical Day in the Life of a Surgeon

"I usually get up about 4:30 or five o'clock, and I work in my study for maybe a couple of hours, mostly studying data or writing, and then I come to the hospital. I get to the hospital between 6:30 and seven. And then I check on the cases I've got operating that morning. Usually by 7:30 we are in the operating room, starting operations. Depending upon what the load is, I may be through by three or four o'clock. Then, I will often take the necessary calls that have accumulated, try to get to some correspondence. And then I've got to see patients that are coming in as outpatients, and also patients that are in the hospital being prepared for an operation the next day. Or there may be a committee meeting I have to attend, or meet with my people in the research laboratory to go over certain things that they are doing, and sort of bringing up to date where we are, certain subjects that we are dealing with, things of that sort. So by eight or nine o'clock, I'll get home and have something to eat. And usually by eleven, between eleven and twelve, I go to bed."

— Dr. Michael E. DeBakey

DeBakey ME. Personal interview on American Academy of Achievement website.
Available at: <http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/coo0int-7>

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