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Doctor's own transplant becomes a blessing for others

Meet Dr. Phil Berry, whose own transplant turned him into an organ-donation champion

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By **SELWYN CRAWFORD** / The Dallas Morning News

Dr. Phil Berry knows conventional wisdom is that angels don't talk – certainly not over the telephone.

But the Oak Cliff orthopedic surgeon is convinced that's exactly who spoke to him 20 years ago when he lay dying after being infected with hepatitis B.

"She said, 'It's your turn,' " Dr. Berry recalls with a faint smile. "She told me they had a liver for me.

"I know a lot of people don't believe angels can talk, but I'd like to think that was my angel."

A few hours later, he was wheeled into a Baylor University Medical Center operating room, where he received a liver from a 30-year-old South Texas mother who had died of an aneurysm.

Dr. Berry, now 69, is spreading some goodwill of his own. He's a tireless advocate for organ donation and co-founder of the Southwest Transplant Foundation, which since 1994 has provided more than \$370,000 in



SMILEY N. POOL/DMN
Dr. Phil Berry comforts Lisa Richardson in the recovery room at Methodist Dallas Medical Center after surgery to improve a chronic hip condition.

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financial aid to organ recipients or their families who needed assistance.

He has become known as a person with a gift for making emotional connections with people, whether they are his family, friends, patients or other organ recipients. In conversations, Dr. Berry always pays close attention, maintaining eye contact and listening intently to what the other person is saying. He can be seen reaching out to his patients, offering a hug, a gentle touch or a reassuring pat on the back before surgery.

"I think Dr. Berry is a guy who's connected to his feelings more than most men his age," says Pam Silvestri, public affairs director for Southwest

Transplant Alliance, a regional organ donation center in Dallas that tracks donors and potential recipients and tries to match them. "You can cry with him, and you can share your deepest thoughts with him, and he supports you. There aren't many people I let call me Pammy, but I let him call me that. And I like it."

Although they have known each other only 11 years, Ms. Silvestri describes Dr. Berry as "more like a father to me than my own father."

Genuinely caring about others is just the way he was raised, Dr. Berry says. But his transplant made him even more aware of how important relationships are.

"There can't be anything better than relationships," he says.

Southern roots

Born in Jackson, Miss., Dr. Berry was raised in rural Laurel. His father was a junior high principal who taught Sunday school at the First Baptist Church, and his mother was a housewife. Those who know him say his Southern upbringing was a big influence.

Dr. Berry fondly describes his childhood surroundings as "an idyllic place to grow up," where "everybody knew everybody and nobody locked their doors." (He bought a home in the Kessler Park area of Dallas because the huge magnolia in the front yard reminded him of his native state.)

He went to college at the University of Mississippi, where he majored in mechanical engineering. He was

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also the school's top singles tennis player for three years and the team captain during his senior year. He graduated in 1959 and joined the U.S. Navy.

But something wasn't right. During college, Dr. Berry says, he was too busy to think about what it would mean to be an engineer. He liked being an engineer and still uses some of those skills, but he wanted to work in a profession that brought him into direct contact with people rather than with concepts, plans and inanimate objects.

He discovered, he says, that he would "rather be a people person than a machine person." So he decided to become a doctor.

He returned to Ole Miss to study medicine, much to the dismay of his father, who couldn't understand why his son would give up a promising engineering career.

His father also couldn't afford to pay for medical school, so Dr. Berry worked as a dormitory manager (to get a free room), taught trigonometry (to get spending money) and waited tables at a sorority house (to get free meals).

He chose to study orthopedics because, by his own admission, he likes to "fix things." Whether it's a busted Achilles tendon or a faulty knee or hip, he can make a person whole again in two hours. Not every form of medicine allows that kind of quick fix.

He graduated third in his medical school class of 1966 and took an internship at Parkland Hospital. A year later, he was doing his residency and soon was on his way to a successful practice and life.

He married the former Karen Williams – then a social worker at Parkland – in 1966, and they raised three daughters.

"I loved the way he treated people," Mrs. Berry says in explaining the attraction. "I loved the way he treated his patients. He was always compassionate."

CareFlite

In 1979, Dr. Berry was instrumental in developing CareFlite, a helicopter emergency transportation service. He met with doctors and officials at Methodist Dallas Medical Center and Harris Methodist Fort Worth Hospital about how best to operate the service. And when CareFlite launched, he became its first medical director.

"I just felt like helicopters were the best way to take

care of trauma patients," says Dr. Berry, although he noted that the service's first patient was a pregnant woman in distress.

"We were determined to do it right. And we weren't so concerned with what was going on in Dallas. Our concern was about those people 150 miles away who would be dead if you tried to drive them to a trauma center in an ambulance."

In the beginning, the two hospitals shared one helicopter. Today, CareFlite has multiple helicopters and several hospitals use the service. It is one of the nation's most successful – and busiest – emergency flight services.

And everything was going well for Dr. Berry, too, until a surgery he performed in 1986.

The illness

Dr. Berry apparently nicked himself while performing a procedure and contracted hepatitis B, then unknowingly passed it along to his wife. Neither was aware of the infection until sometime later, when he noticed that she was jaundiced. Then doctors discovered he was ill, too.

"She got over it," Dr. Berry says. "I didn't. It completely ate up my liver. Here I was one day, completely healthy, good practice, three beautiful daughters. And now I was going downhill fast."

A friend came by his hospital room and told Dr. Berry something he already knew but didn't want to hear: that he would die without a liver transplant.

"I didn't want to hear it because I knew I'd have to confront it," says Dr. Berry, who supported organ donation at the time but hadn't signed a donor card. "All my life, I'd solved other people's problems, and now I had a problem and I couldn't solve it."

The liver transplant changed Dr. Berry's life and, directly and indirectly, the lives of hundreds of others.

"Usually, right after a transplant, most people want to give back," Ms. Silvestri says. "They come over and we train them, and they go out and speak to groups and they'll speak to people waiting on a transplant. But most of them don't go out and create a foundation that 15 years later is still going out and helping out."

Dr. Berry says he helps others because he must.

"I think God said, 'I'm going to let you live, but here's what you've got to do,' " he says. "I don't know how

many people have a true sense of what they're put on Earth to do, but I certainly do."

The illness took him down a path that eventually made him "a much better doctor," he says.

Dr. Berry explains: "Learning how to be a patient is not what they teach you in medical school And until you are [a patient], you can't understand the fears and the things that you want to know. But I understand now what it's like to be a patient."

The connection

Dr. Bob Gunby, a gynecologist, met Dr. Berry about 10 years ago, well after the transplant. But it didn't take him long to learn about his friend's history and to see why others are so touched by him and his story.

"His compassion really comes out when he talks about it," Dr. Gunby says. "He's still, to this day, very emotional about it."

He adds, "I could hear his same story over and over a hundred times, and I'll still want to hear it. You just buy into it because it is so sincere and from his heart."

Dr. Berry's ability to tell his story has been a boon to the Southwest Transplant Foundation. He and fellow liver recipient George Crutcher decided to start the foundation while playing golf one day.

"We just looked around and said, 'Isn't this great to be able to be out here and play golf?' " Dr. Berry says. "And we thought, 'Wouldn't it be great if we could do something to help people who are having a tough time financially because they had to have a transplant?' "

Combining their desire to help with their passion for golf, the men organized a golf tournament. About 97 percent of the money the foundation raises goes directly to organ recipients or their families, Dr. Berry says.

And some of the greatest relationships he has are with the beneficiaries of the foundation, he says.

"We've had people who had to make decisions about whether to buy their drugs" they needed after a transplant, Dr. Berry says. "We've paid mortgages, made car payments, bought groceries. We're there to cover things the insurance won't."

One of those who was helped is Barbie Herskowitz of Plano. Her son, Richie, who has cystic fibrosis, received a double lung transplant in 1996 when he was

6. He's stable and doing well now, but he needed a treadmill for exercise to help his lungs. Her husband works three jobs to pay for the family's medical bills – another child also has cystic fibrosis – and they couldn't afford the \$500 equipment. The foundation stepped in.

"The foundation was absolutely wonderful because our insurance would not have paid for it," says Mrs. Herskowitz, who has never met Dr. Berry. "There are a lot of people who could be doing this sort of thing, but they aren't and he is."

And then there is the connection that Dr. Berry has formed with the family of the woman who saved his life.

The donor

Gale Shaddox was a 30-year-old mother with a 7-year-old daughter when she suffered a fatal aneurysm on Oct. 27, 1986.

Her mother, Lois Guillott, said her youngest daughter had always wanted to be an organ donor. In addition to her liver, she donated both kidneys, her heart and the skin off her back.

Dr. Berry says he felt a need to meet her family at some point. He finally did in 1996, when he traveled to the family's church, along with his wife and children, to give his testimony and spend time with his donor's relatives.

"It was the tenderest moment of my life," he says. "They said it was just wonderful to know that part of her is still alive doing things for others."

Still, he had a question for Mrs. Guillott.

"He asked if he was a part of our family, and I said, 'Sure you are,' " says Mrs. Guillott, who lives in Brazoria, Texas. "Dr. Berry is a wonderful man. His whole family is. I'm glad I got to know him."

Still working

Although he's nearly 70, Dr. Berry has no immediate plans to retire from his medical practice. "I can't wait to get up every morning and go fix something," he says.

He sees patients each week and performs surgeries twice a week. "I just love medicine too much to just give it up," he says, smiling.

Dr. Berry and his wife recently returned from Latvia, where they visited orphans with a church group – he's a deacon at Cliff Temple Baptist Church.

He's eased his speaking schedule just a bit from the months immediately after the transplant, but he never turns down an invitation to talk to groups or individuals about organ donation. And he was instrumental in organizing the American Medical Association's "Live Then Give" donor awareness program.

For Dr. Berry, all of it is just his way of giving back, of saying thank you, "over and over again."

"I think my daddy would not have a question now about why I wanted to go back to medical school," Dr. Berry says. "I think he'd be proud."

The 13th Annual Phil Berry Transplant Tournament is scheduled for Oct. 16. For information, visit www.swtransplant.org or call 214.943.1652 .

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- [Mavericks/NBA](#)
- [Rangers/MLB](#)
- [Stars/NHL](#)
- [Colleges](#)
- [High Schools](#)
- [Golf](#)
- [Motor Sports](#)
- [Pro Soccer](#)
- [Other Sports](#)

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