

MY YEARS WITH MICHAEL E. DeBAKEY

Larry L. Mathis, M.H.A.

Founding CEO of The Methodist Hospital System

When I became president and CEO of The Methodist Hospital in 1983, I was 40 years old; our world-famous medical statesman was 75, newly married, and the father of a young daughter. Having worked at Methodist for 12 years before being named CEO, I was well acquainted with the legend that was Dr. DeBakey as well as the apocryphal stories about him. But I hadn't had a personal relationship with him.

Dr. Michael Ellis DeBakey was the most prominent physician of all time. He certainly put The Methodist Hospital in Houston on the world map and continued to grace it with his presence, wisdom, and guidance until his death at age 99. He was in constant pursuit of excellence and physician to kings, presidents, prime ministers, movie stars, and to common men and women who worshipped him. To me, he was everything the legend said he was. And, he was human.

A delicate point in our relationship was reached when it came time for Baylor College of Medicine and Methodist to consolidate the leadership in our surgery department. The problem: someone needed to convince the world's most famous surgeon to retire from his chairmanship of Baylor for the good of the college and the hospital. Since I was young and naïve, everyone agreed that I should be the one to broach the subject. I invited him to my office and began poorly. I stumbled about, talking about life's uncertainties, about change being the only constant, and then I blurted out some-

thing about death — that either one of us could be hit by a bus. Dr. DeBakey said, "Larry, I think I know what you are getting at. If that should happen, I would like to say a few words at your funeral!"

I once escorted him to West Texas for a speaking engagement. At the reception that followed, people came up and reminded him that he had operated on them, their parent, their sibling. It was an incredibly memorable experience because he was treated with such reverence and awe. It was like traveling with a rock star — people just wanted to touch him.

When Methodist was contemplating restarting organ transplantation, there was considerable opposition from our medical staff because of their prior transplant experiences (enormous disruption from constant press coverage and the ultimate failure due to organ rejection). Dr. DeBakey wanted to begin again; the medical staff did not. The DeBakey of the apocryphal stories could have demanded that we begin the program and the medical staff be damned. He could have pointed out, rightfully, that he put Methodist on the world stage. But he didn't. Instead, he graciously agreed that the hospital needed time to come to terms with the decision.

The fact that I was honored to lead the practice home of the world's most prominent surgeon will always be among my proudest memories. I almost wish he could have said a few words at my funeral.