

## AFFAIRS OF THE HEART

Dr. Chip Oswalt Founder of HeartGift

# HeartGift Founder, Dr. John “Chip” Oswalt Credits Serendipity for Many of His Accomplishments

By Leanne DuPay

British writer and politician Horace Walpole wrote 3,000 letters during his lifetime. In 1754, one of those letters introduced the word “serendipity.” He invented the word after reading a Persian fairy tale called “The Three Princes of Serendip.” Throughout the tale, the characters happen upon good fortune again and again. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines serendipity as “finding valuable or pleasant things that are not looked for.” In simpler terms, serendipity means “a happy accident.”

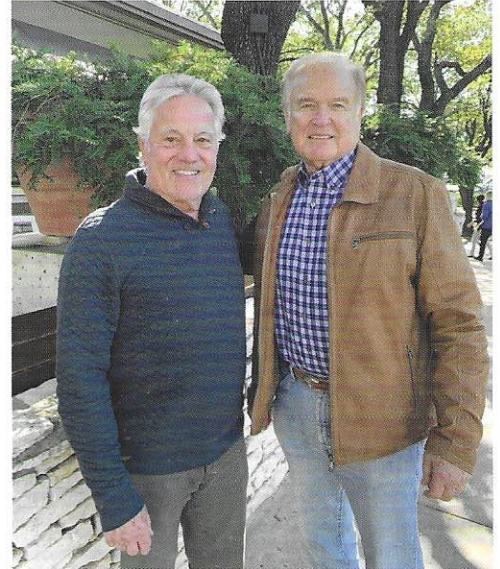
“My whole life has been infused with serendipity,” says a smiling Dr. John “Chip” Oswalt. “It just happens. I can’t complain.” Oswalt comes from a family of physicians. His father, Charles “Ozzie” Oswalt was a doctor, and his three brothers are physicians. “We grew up in medicine—we saw the good Dad did and it influenced us.” But it wasn’t just

his father who influenced him—enter his father’s best friend—Dr. Bud Dryden, a GP who treated everyone, all races and accepted livestock for payment when patients had no money. He treated firemen and policemen for free. “When he died, they blocked MoPac and lined the streets with firemen and law enforcement, all with their hats off,” Oswalt remembers. “I loved that guy.”

As an intern at Brackenridge Hospital, Oswalt was determined to be with the best surgeons around. “In my mind these were the heart docs—Calhoon, Arnold, Tate, and Kirksey,” he explains. “One morning I am having breakfast with them, and they get a stat call for a blood clot in the lung of a woman who had just given birth. She was going to die.” Because he was sitting with these doctors, Oswalt was included in the response team. He remembers thinking, “THIS IS IT!”

It was his chance to prove himself and bond with these cardiothoracic physicians. “We saved her, and I became part of the group.”

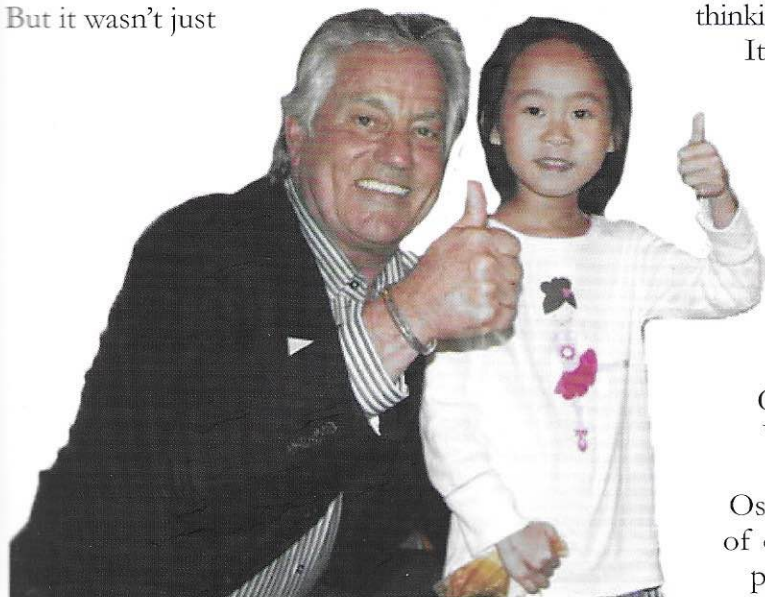
Joining Cardiothoracic and Vascular Surgeons (CTVS) in 1980, Oswalt was now part of one of the leading physician groups in



*HeartGift founders Dr. Oswalt and Ray Wilkerson*

Central Texas—a group known for pioneering a record number of medical “firsts” in Central Texas. As Austin continued to grow, so did the need for a local transplant program. In the fall of 1985 Oswalt and Drs. Arnold, Calhoon, and Dilling traveled to Stanford to learn how to set up a transplant program. By February 1986, they were back in Austin. The new Seton Central Texas Heart Institute was established, and Oswalt was on the surgical team that performed the first local heart transplant.

Serendipity was in play again when Oswalt traveled to England to a heart valve conference where he hoped to learn the Ross Procedure. The Ross Procedure was first performed by Dr. Donald Ross in 1967. The surgery involves using living tissue for valve replacement as opposed to a mechanical valve. After a long day of training, Oswalt and his wife walked to a nearby pub. It wasn’t long before Dr. Ross himself



*Dr. Oswalt poses with a patient after her successful surgery.*

walked in. Oswalt introduced himself, mentioning he traveled from Texas. “I have a friend there,” says Ross. Turns out Oswalt had operated on that friend. Before long, it was agreed that Dr. Ross would travel to Texas to teach the Ross Procedure to Texas physicians. In 1989, Dr. Oswalt performed the first Ross Procedure in Texas. Since then, he has traveled the country teaching the procedure and is internationally known for his expertise.

The years of being a leader in cardiothoracic surgery and working within our medical community to bring procedures to Austin meant Oswalt was frequently consulted when help was needed. Fast forward to 1999, when a colleague on a mission trip in Kosovo discovers six children with congenital heart defects. “He calls and asks me if he can get these kids to Austin—will CTVS do the surgeries for free?” says Oswalt. Donations were received and the surgeries were done, the children sent home to live healthy lives. “It got me thinking and really raised my awareness about the number of children out there without a chance of medical help. Did you know that 1 in 100 children worldwide is born with congenital heart defects? Over 90% of those children do not have access to the care they need.” With these statistics top of mind, Oswalt approached his hunting and fishing buddy, Ray Wilkerson about starting an organization that could help. “I’m in,” said Ray without hesitation. Wilkerson is a local developer with the

connections needed to get things off the ground. In 2000, HeartGift was established. It’s mission: *To provide life-saving congenital heart defect surgery to children from around the world where specialized medical treatment is either scarce or nonexistent.*

Medical mission groups were alerted so children identified with heart problems could be considered for HeartGift. Guidelines for consideration are that the child be at least one year old, and that one surgery will fix the problem. To contain costs, local families host the patient during his/her surgery stay. The organization is run by a small team of full-time administrators and a board of directors. Because of the economical way the organization

operates, overhead is only 15%, which means 85% of the funding raised for HeartGift is used for the patients and their treatment.

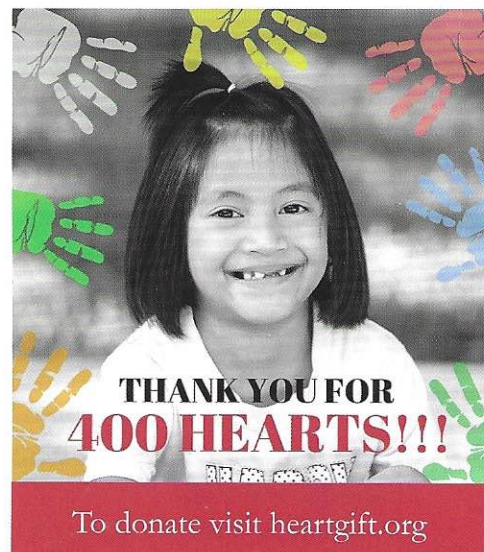
Twenty-three years have passed since its beginning and HeartGift is now able to host its own medical missions and even helped sponsor the building of a pediatric heart center in Kenya.

In addition, HeartGift chapters in San Antonio, New Orleans, and Houston now exist.

Here in Austin, HeartGift partners with Dell Children’s Medical Center, reimbursing them



*Patient Ariun traveled from Mongolia for his heart surgery.*



approximately \$25,000 for each surgery. The other chapters partner with their local children’s hospitals. To date, the organization has served more than 700 children from 35 countries.

So exactly where does the funding come from? Funding for HeartGift comes from numerous sources including grants, donations, and various events throughout the year. For example, these annual events—“HeartGift Heroes” golf tournament, “Heartfelt Shot” sporting clay shooting tournament, and HeartGift’s “Party with a Purpose” gala, all help fund the organization. Another key donation source is the annual children’s charity event “Mack, Jack & McConaughy” founded by Mack Brown, Jack Ingram, and Matthew McConaughy. Mack and Sally Brown selected HeartGift as one of the charities to benefit from this high profile happening.

“This is going to be a great year; I think we may be able to serve 400 children in 2023 alone!” says Dr. Oswalt grinning. And though one can appreciate the serendipitous occurrences in his life, it is plain to see there is more to it than that. Dr. John “Chip” Oswalt is a brilliant heart surgeon with a really, really big heart.