A stunned husband gathered his two teenaged sons alongside their mother’s hospital bed. They wondered how something like this could happen so quickly.

By every medical indication, 40 year old Mary Ann Deck was dying. She had been living with a heart ailment known as cardiomyopathy. It’s a medical term defined in layman’s terms as disease of the heart muscle. It first showed up after a pregnancy, and Deck had followed her doctor’s orders. But a new job brought higher stress levels. Her uneasy coexistence with cardiomyopathy ended abruptly.

Within three months, her chances for survival spiraled downward.

“It had been 16 years after the time I was first diagnosed, and then all of a sudden (my heart) just failed,” says Deck. “We knew it was going to happen sooner or later.”

Twenty years ago this spring, Mary Ann Deck was given the gift of seeing her two sons through high school, marriage and fatherhood. She became the first woman to receive a heart transplant at the University of Cincinnati.

At the time of her critical need, Dr. David Melvin (’64) had already performed 10 heart transplants at Cincinnati’s University Hospital. His surgical suite was about a two-hour drive from Deck’s home in Liberty, Ind.

After discharge, Deck says walking the streets of Liberty was a slow process – and only partially because she was recovering from major surgery.

“It would take me three hours to walk a block downtown. Everybody would stop me and want to talk to me. I had celebrity status.”

The Union University alumnus who performed that ground-breaking surgery also received some public attention, but Deck says he’ll never get the credit he deserves.

“I would not be alive if it weren’t for Dr. Melvin,” says Deck. “I do not know of any finer person on earth.”

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“I was pretty much solo”

Deck’s happy story is one of many that unfolded from 1985-1990, when Melvin ran the heart transplant program at University Hospital. “You’re taking people from a horrible existence,” says Melvin. “We were able to see those people getting around, playing with their kids or grandchildren. Some of them went back to work.”

“It was great. It was gratifying. It makes you feel very humble and very thankful that you can be a part of that.”

But 1983 brought approval of the anti-rejection drug cyclosporine, and success stories became more common. Achievement back then was measured in modest increments.

“I thought if I made it five years, I would be doing well, says Deck. “That’s all I was looking for. I never dreamed I’d live this long.”

In all but a few hospitals, the procedure was well outside the medical mainstream in 1984. That is when the University of Cincinnati asked Melvin to start a transplant program from scratch. Only a few years earlier, he and several colleagues had been recruited from private practice to help start the university’s cardiac-surgery program at University Hospital.

Melvin spent months observing heart transplant programs at Stanford University and the University of Pittsburgh. He appears uncomfortable with the title “pioneer,” because others had been in the field long before his first transplant surgery in December 1985. Still, Melvin was blazing trails in Cincinnati, a city known nationally for the quality of its health care and its interest in mechanical methods to replace blood itself.

“The program continues very successfully after 20 years due to the efforts of a large number of people,” says one of Melvin’s former students, Dr. Melvin, says Dr. John Fluge, professor of surgery at the University of Cincinnati Medical Center and sometime collaborator on the “father” of cardiac surgery in that region. “[Melvin] designed, organized, and led the effort in itsative years.”

“It was pretty much solo,” says Melvin. “I found out there were a lot of very good internists and medicine people around, but with something this new, most of them didn’t want to have anything to do with it.”

“Who gets one, and who doesn’t?”

The first heart transplant at University Hospital came together in a blur of developments. As is often the case, a donor heart became available quickly in another part of the country. With almost no notice, Melvin found himself on a plane bound for Mobile, Ala. to supervise the preparations. At the same time, Charlie Ashcraft of nearby Alexandria, Ky. was prepared for surgery at University Hospital.

Melvin returned and performed the transplant, then stayed with Ashcraft in the intensive care unit to be certain he would be stable. It meant going 36 consecutive hours without sleep.

“Helping 100 people is nice, but globally, it’s a drop in the bucket.”

A few years earlier, Melvin had been a group practice of general internists, he said. “I realized that I was stuck in a little area and they stayed in it,” says Melvin. “They just couldn’t think or do much of anything.”

“I really had mixed feelings. I was fascinated with transplants. But I had real doubts.”

In 1967, Dr. Christiaan Barnard performed the first heart transplant. By the early 1970s, transplants were being done regularly at Stanford University. Survival rates were poor, with transplants. But I had real doubts.”

By 1990, Melvin and his team at University Hospital had performed 100 heart transplant surgeries. Melvin would bask in the financial rewards and the job satisfaction that came from extending human life. But Melvin had a global perspective and a love for research that started in his undergraduate years at Union.

“Helping 100 people is nice, but globally, it’s a drop in the bucket.”

Melvin has trade-marked the name RePower.

“It allows us to replace the heart’s muscle power without replacing the living blood vessel tissue inside it.”

“You're taking people from a hospital to a chair-to-bed.”

“Back then, everyone at Union had their little area and they stayed in it,” says David Blackstock (‘64), Union’s long-time athletic director and a student during Melvin’s time at the university. “What David was was rather quiet, but everyone in each of those areas had a great deal of respect for him.”

But Melvin still stands out in her mind as “an outstanding scholar, especially in biology.”

Melvin's lecture topic was “living my work hours.”

“With those years of long days in mind, Melvin describes his wife Sue as “wonderfully patient and tolerant.” The couple recently marked their 40th wedding anniversary. Melvin has also been an extended family of Cincinnati transplant recipients. Many of them gathered last year to celebrate 20 years since Melvin and Mary Ann Deck celebrated 20 years from Melvin.

Melvin is the son of the late Dr. Melvin, a cardiologist and researcher at University Hospital. “I’m sure he would have been impressed with what he saw,” says Melvin. “I’m sure he would have been very, very proud.”

“Two Main Goals”

Melvin and W. Craig Carter, president of Heart Transplantation at Union.

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