This is a year of milestones: The National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute and the American Heart Association have reached the half-century mark. The famous Framingham Heart Study began in 1948.

And 50 years ago, Michael Ellis DeBakey, MD, came to a fledgling medical school shakily poised in the subtropical boomb town that was Houston, Tex. This year, Dr DeBakey celebrates not only that anniversary, but his 90th birthday as well.

To those who know Dr DeBakey, it is no surprise that in the ensuing years, he became the school’s president, chancellor, and chancellor emeritus. Under his leadership, a fledgling school in a precarious financial state—Baylor College of Medicine—became a leader in clinical medicine and began its climb toward national status in the field of biomedical research.

Dr DeBakey’s honors are almost too many to mention. The American Medical Association gave him its distinguished service award. President Lyndon B. Johnson awarded him the Medal of Freedom With Distinction, the highest honor that can be accorded a civilian. He has also received honorary doctorates from universities around the world and the highest honors that many nations can award.

In 1996, he was inducted into the Health Care Hall of Fame.

It all began in Lake Charles, La, just after the turn of the century. Dr DeBakey likes to remind interviewers that Lake Charles had no more than 13 000 citizens when he was growing up. The DeBakey clan, 2 brothers and 3 sisters, a mother, and a father, cast long shadows.

“Our parents were very much concerned about their children and almost lived for their children. They gave us everything we wanted. In fact, after my junior year in medical school, I got a car because I wanted to live separately from the other students,” he said. But his parents taught him that he was expected to remember those less fortunate as well.

On Sundays, they would pack up clothes and food for children who lived in an orphanage on the outskirts of town. His sister Lois DeBakey remembers that her brother objected once when his favorite cap was included in the clothing bundles. “My mother sat him down and said, ‘You have a lot of caps. These children have none.’” Her parents were always teaching us about life and principles.”

His parents, Shaker Morris and Raheeja Zorba DeBakey, were immigrants from Lebanon who met and married in the United States. “Both my father and mother were almost self-educated,” said Dr DeBakey. But they wanted the best education possible for their children. That started with a requirement that each check out 1 book each week from the Lake Charles Public Library.

Selma DeBakey, another of Dr DeBakey’s sisters, remembers the hot summer days fondly. The DeBakey children and their friends would sit on the front porch with their books, sharing milk, cookies, and the occasional sentence from their readings. “It was a lovely time,” she said.

Real world experience also played a part in their education. Young Michael DeBakey learned to keep books in his father’s drug store before he went to college. When his father enrolled the 17-year-old in Tulane University in New Orleans, he gave him the money he needed for 1 year. “He said, ‘Now I’m giving this boy this account, and he can write checks on it.’” said Dr DeBakey. “‘He can spend it all tomorrow and come home. Or he can budget it for the whole year because that’s all he is going to get for the whole year.’” Dr DeBakey learned to manage his money.

It was not a surprise that Michael DeBakey was a star as an undergraduate and in medical school at Tulane. “As far back as I can recall, I wanted to study medicine. I wanted to be a doctor.”

At Tulane University School of Medicine, he found his mentor in the renowned Dr Alton Ochsner, who persuaded him to become a surgeon. As early as 1932, while still a medical student at Tulane, Dr DeBakey developed the roller pump that eventually became a key element of the heart-lung machine. After medical school and 2 years of surgical residency training at Charity Hospital in New Orleans, Dr DeBakey went to Europe to study under the finest surgeons of the day: Dr Rene Leriche was a prominent vascular surgeon in France, and Dr Martin Kirschner was one of the leading surgeons in Germany. Dr DeBakey spent 2 years with them, and in 1937, he returned to Tulane to join the faculty.

He might have stayed there but for World War II. When Dr DeBakey joined the US Army, he was named a colonel and was immediately put to work in the Surgeon General’s office. His work there led to the development of the fast-tracked military medical unit called MASH, or Mobile Army Surgical Hospital, and to a follow-up system for veterans’ health problems that resulted in the present-day system of Veterans Affairs hospitals.

Between 1950 and 1953, Dr DeBakey developed the Dacron grafts that are crucial to the repair of the body’s deteriorating vasculature. In 1953, he performed the first...
successful endarterectomy, and in 1956, he performed the first patch-graft angioplasty.

By 1960, he was fighting for federal funds to develop the artificial heart, and in 1966, he successfully used a left ventricular assist device to keep a woman alive while her heart recovered from open heart surgery. In 1963, he presaged the future by participating in the first international interactive use of telemedicine when he performed open heart surgery for an audience in Geneva, Switzerland. In 1964, Dr DeBakey performed the first aortocoronary artery bypass, and in 1968, he performed his first heart transplant.

During the past half century, Dr DeBakey has played many roles: surgeon, politician, visionary, health policy advisor, educator, medical statesman, and advisor to world leaders. Despite all of those roles, he has remained a physician with a drive to heal, whether the ailment is one that affects an individual patient or an entire nation’s healthcare system.
Milestones for Dr DeBakey
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