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How many of us bring hope and better living to others every single day? “Returning someone to their life is an incredible experience that I share with my entire team and the patient,” Dr. Gerdisch says, gratefully. He tells me of a woman who had undergone a transcatheter valve procedure, in which a valve is inserted through the leg or a small incision in the chest, but with no stopping of the heart. “This woman is magnificent,” he tells me. “She lived through World War II, hiding in a bunker, got tuberculosis, came to the US with nothing, was in a T.B. sanitarium, and then worked as a maid and waitress. But she built a life here.” When Dr. Gerdisch met her, the woman was in her 80s and had considerable health problems—but her mind was sharp and witty, and she had no interest whatsoever in dying. “We implanted her valve, and within days she was right back to cleaning her house and taking care of her dog. This beautiful elderly woman got her life back.” He adds, excitedly, “This sort of thing happens to me all the time!”

Dr. Gerdisch, a 1987 graduate of Loyola University Stritch School of Medicine, is a heart surgeon with Franciscan St. Francis Health Center and Cardiac Surgery Associates, specializing in heart valve surgery. He has to date performed over 4,000 cardiac surgeries, more than 2,500 of which involved heart valve procedures. “I cannot remember a time I did not want to be a physician,” says Dr. Gerdisch. During med school, he quickly found himself fascinated by cardiovascular disease, and in the 1980s, he tells me, so much was still unknown. He became especially interested in heart valve surgery, enamored of its ingenuity and artfulness. “The notion that I could directly correct a problem inside a person’s heart was a constant attraction,” he says. “Work with heart valves provided an opportunity to reconstruct delicate moving structures that serve crucial roles in the performance of our bodies and our longevity.”

Cardiac Surgery Associates, the group of 35 surgeons to which Dr. Gerdisch belongs, staffs 32 programs/hospitals in three states. “I’ve been in the group 21 years,” he tells me, “and I would typically go on-site to set up a new program and be involved with the development.” And so it was with the cardiac center at Franciscan St. Francis. Dr. Gerdisch brought surgeons to Indianapolis to interview with the cardiologists at Franciscan, and he found that these were cream of the crop cardiologists. “They were honest and forthright, dedicated and insightful, clearly skilled and...
knowledgeable,” he says. After several visits to Indianapolis, Dr. Gerdisch decided finally that he wanted to come here himself—and the cardiologists agreed. “I went home and asked my wife how she felt about moving to Indianapolis,” he says. And soon they were on their way.

**DEFYING DEFINITION**

Society often demands that we define ourselves in some way or another. It’s refreshing to hear from such an esteemed surgeon as Dr. Gerdisch that he doesn’t believe in definition. “Being defined sounds a bit limiting,” he says. “I hope I can’t be defined, as that seems very finite. My happiness is derived from constant interaction with the people I love and all of the wonderful people in my life.” And his interaction with work is constant. Dr. Gerdisch operates every day except Tuesday, beginning at 7:30 AM, performing usually two to three cases each day. In between operations, he visits patients and consults with his cardiology colleagues. “We work very closely in every step of patient care,” he tells me. “One of the cardiologists specializing in valve disease is in the operating with me every day, performing echocardiographic evaluation of the heart and confirming perfection in the procedure.” A team of nurses and physician assistants constantly monitor and work with patients, keeping Dr. Gerdisch and his partners fully informed. Dr. Gerdisch explains that he often journals cases for later presentation. “Usually, I try to get a call in with people involved in our ongoing research or teaching projects,” he says. “I’ve had the opportunity to work with some of the greatest heart surgeons in history as a result of these studies, and it has taken me around the world, many times over, to present our findings.” And as much as Dr. Gerdisch loves to operate, he loves to connect to his patients as well. “On Tuesdays I meet new patients and see people for whom we’ve already done surgery,” he says. “You can’t imagine how rewarding it is to watch people return to their lives, better.”

**GOING WITH THE FLOW**

The focus of Dr. Gerdisch’s life is clearly his work, which he sees more as a way of life than a job. “I love what I do so much that I don’t crave much outside my vocation and my family,” he says. He doesn’t have any hobbies to speak of—other than reading, but Dr. Gerdisch would be more likely to call that another love, not a hobby. Of course, he thoroughly enjoys the time he’s able to spend with his wife and two sons. Each winter, the family travels out West to ski together. “It’s our favorite thing to do during the winter, and we try to get out there a couple of times a year,” Dr. Gerdisch says. And having moved here from Chicago, it’s only a two- and-a-half hour trip up to visit old friends. “My wife especially loves to go back to Chicago, and so we do that occasionally. And I try to get to Florida to see my parents during the winter.”

As any medical professional would, Dr. Gerdisch advocates strongly for exercise and healthy eating. But he doesn’t believe that rigid schedules or unyielding habits are the answer. “I think balance is being fluid in your daily existence, the ability to mold the next day to your expectations,” he says. “For instance, I try to get four hours of exercise each week. Sometimes that takes the form of four one-hour workouts, and sometimes it’s a couple of half-hour workouts and extended workouts when I can.” He points out that if your habit is to exercise at a particular time each day, and you don’t do it, then it’s easy to condition yourself not to do it anymore. It’s the same with diet, he says. “Having a healthy diet is a fairly simple thing to do. You have to pursue some fresh fruits, find some legumes and vegetables, and it needs to happen every day. If you miss one day, you just can’t let yourself slump into another pattern.”

For Dr. Gerdisch, balance is about maintaining fluidity in all aspects of life. “It’s about identifying principle goals in your diet, your exercise, your relations with people, your opportunities to laugh,” he says. “If you can, put yourself in an environment where you feel productive and supported. I’m incredibly lucky, as I get up every day and go to a job I love, with people I enjoy.”

While finishing up our conversation, Dr. Gerdisch gets a text message. “Oh my Lord, such hope you’ve brought our Mom. We are just overwhelmed to support you upon this journey in recovery.’’ He tells me that this comes from a man whose mother was told she’d reached the end of the line—to go to palliative care and then to hospice. “We did a double valve and Maze procedure for her a couple days ago, and she’s sitting up chatting with her family now,” Dr. Gerdisch tells me. “And tomorrow I’m operating on a woman who was rejected from two major hospitals. In the morning, I’m going to fix her valves and her irregular heart rhythm, and several days later, I plan on giving her a hug and sending her out the door. It’s incredible stuff, right?” I’m sure his patients would agree.
Dr. Gerdisch considers himself very fortunate to have participated in trials and research that has enhanced the cardiac field’s ability to preserve and restore the architecture and function of the heart. You’ve already been introduced to transcatheter valve implants, and I urge you to visit the hospital’s website to learn about new technology with lower anticoagulation valves (the On-X Heart Valve). Here, though, we’ll focus on what is known as Extracellular Matrix.

In speaking with Dr. Gerdisch, I learn that it had long been believed that the adult heart could not generate any new cells. However, research out of Berkeley in the early 1980s unveiled a complex “microenvironment” that surrounded the cells in every organ of every animal. This came to be called the Extracellular Matrix (ECM). “When I was in med school, they called it ‘ground substance’—they didn’t know what it was doing,” says Dr. Gerdisch. “In a sense you can compare it to a highrise, and the apartments are the cells. The girders, the electrical conduit, the water pipes—that’s the ECM.” He goes on to explain how the cells in our eyeballs and those in our toes start out exactly the same, but it’s the ECM that informs the cell what it’s supposed to develop into. “The eyeball cell becomes an eye cell because of the microenvironment, the ECM.”

The Extracellular Matrix was first introduced for cardiac surgery in 2006, and is used by Dr. Gerdisch and the other cardiovascular surgeons at Franciscan St. Francis to augment and repair the heart and its valves. In fact, his team was the first in the world to apply the ECM bio-technology. Derived from the small intestine of a pig, the ECM is processed in a way that removes all cells, leaving only the complex structural matrix, made of collagen. The ECM comes as an exceptionally strong, but very pliable and thin, sheet. Once implanted in the heart, the ECM harnesses the body’s own ability to repair and repopulate damaged cardiovascular tissue, enabling patients to heal naturally. The body is allowed to heal with its own cells, avoiding any rejection.

“We have built an amazing team, with the ability to be constantly creative and design treatments for the most complex patients” Dr. Gerdisch says. “When patients choose me to perform their surgery, I consider it a privilege. I have the luxury, and my patients have the benefit, of being part of a process based on excellent communication and partnership among some of the finest health care professionals working in cardiac care.”