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mending a broken heart

UMMC's Children's Heart Center is saving lives and defying odds.

by lisa lafontaine bynum

Sixteen-year-old Lilly Addy used to have a broken heart.

Not the traditional broken heart that so many young girls deal with at her age—Lilly's broken heart wasn't the result of a teenage heartthrob. The sophomore at Newton High School was born with a congenital heart condition known as mild hypertrophic cardiomyopathy. It is caused by a thickening of the heart muscle, which caused a blockage to the inside of her left ventricle and disrupted blood flow to her body.

Brookhaven pediatric cardiologist David Braden has monitored Lilly's condition since infancy. While she has had to avoid participating in sports and other physical activities to prevent putting too much stress on her heart, for the most part Lilly has been able to lead a normal life. However, the reality that Lilly would ultimately need surgery has always loomed in the background. This past summer, alarmed by the increasing level of pressure present in her heart and a possible aneurysm of her aortic root, Dr. Braden decided Lilly couldn't wait any longer.

Up until two years ago, a pediatric cardiac patient in Mississippi—like Lilly—would have traveled thousands of miles to receive the life-saving surgery required, usually at a great cost and at the family's expense. The state's only pediatric heart surgery program, which had been a part of the University of Mississippi Medical Center (UMMC), became inactive shortly after the untimely death of Dr. Bobby Heath in 2000. In 2008, recognizing a desperate need for the program, UMMC and Batson Children's Hospital contracted with Richard Jonas of Children's National Medical Center in Washington, D.C., to help bridge the gap. Once a week, Dr. Jonas flew to Mississippi,

operated on the less complex cases at Batson Children's Hospital, and sent patients with the most severe conditions back to D.C. It was a beginning, but Mississippi officials and the staff of UMMC knew they would have to do more.

In 2010, Batson Children's Hospital recruited pediatric heart surgeon Jorge Salazar from Texas Children's Hospital in Houston to lead the rebuilding efforts. Because it had been nearly 10 years since Mississippi offered this service, Salazar had to rebuild the program from scratch. It was a huge undertaking, but something Salazar felt led to do.

"It was the opportunity to make a difference," Salazar says. "There was a tremendous need, and it was so obvious how much work there was to be done in terms of children who were previously not able to get care and had to go thousands of miles away to get treated."

Salazar began small, pulling together a handful of clinicians, nurses, doctors, and therapists. They began treating less severe conditions and escalating to the most difficult cases.

"Pediatric heart surgery is really a multi-disciplinary effort. It's not just about surgery.

Surgery is just a component of it," Salazar adds. "It is also about the support staff working together to help in the recovery."

By the end of their first year, the staff of the Children's Heart Center had graduated to treating some of the most challenging cases. That summer, Daniel DiBardino, joined the team. DiBardino studied at Harvard Medical School and previously served as chief resident of the congenital heart surgery program at C.S. Mott Children's Hospital at the University of Michigan Medical School in Ann Arbor. Through his extensive





Doctors DiBardino and Salazar work together to perform difficult surgeries. These surgeries can often last longer than 12 hours.

education, he is highly trained in a complicated surgical procedure known as the Norwood operation. It is most commonly used to treat patients born with Hypoplastic Left Heart Syndrome, also known as HLHS, a condition where an infant is born without the left side of his or her heart. Not only is the procedure extremely delicate, but it typically must be performed within the first 7 to 14 days of life.

That includes patients like eight-month-old Kasey Terry from Columbus. The day Kasey and his mother Tiffany were supposed to be discharged from the hospital, doctors discovered that the left side of Kasey's heart was significantly smaller than the right. Within two weeks, little Kasey was being wheeled into an operating room at the Children's Heart Center for the first of three surgeries he would have to undergo. The surgery went off without a hitch, and after two weeks of recovery in the NICU, he was finally able to come home for the first time.

Had the Children's Heart Center at Batson Children's Hospital not existed, spending a month in a hospital thousands of miles away would have proved extremely difficult for Tiffany, who was not only recovering from childbirth, but also had a four-year-old daughter and a husband who was serving overseas at the time as part of the Army National Guard.

Tiffany says the staff at the Children's Heart Center did their best to put her at ease. "The staff was great," she states. "Everybody took the time to tell you exactly what was going on. Even if they had to explain it 50 times, they let you know what to be prepared for." Kasey returned to the Children's Heart Center in August for his second surgery. His final surgery will occur somewhere between two and three years of age.

Lilly's mother, Michelle, wholeheartedly agrees. Lilly underwent surgery on August 22 to remove the muscle causing the blockage in her heart in addition to a valve sparing aortic root



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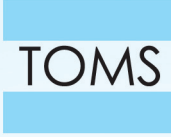
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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Dr. Jorge Salazar, chief of congenital heart surgery at UMMC, checks in on Zavin Arellano after his arterial switch operation. The operation was the first of its kind in the state. Dr. Daniel DiBardino, congenital heart surgeon, reassures heart transplant recipient Malcolm Jones. The planned Children's Heart Center will serve Mississippi's children and those in nearby states. Friends of Children's Hospital announced a \$2 million pledge to help build the Children's Heart Center at its annual Enchanted Evening event. Standing in front of a model of the center are, from left, Dr. Rick Barr, chairman of the UMMC Department of Pediatrics, Sara Ray, chairman of the Friends board, and Dr. James Keeton, UMMC vice chancellor for health affairs.

replacement to repair the aneurysm. Her prognosis is good, and the doctors say she should be able to lead a completely normal life without limitations.

"Lilly was in surgery from 6:30 that morning until 8:30 that night," Michelle recalls. "During that time someone called every hour to keep us updated on what was going on. It was very comforting. The entire team worked together like clockwork."

In a little over two years, the Children's Heart Center has performed more than 700 operations, including four heart transplants. What began as a handful of staff members and two beds in the corner of the pediatric ICU has now grown into a 16-bed pediatric cardiac ICU with a dedicated staff of doctors, nurses, and therapists. They have also managed to beat the national average for patient survival.

"We are performing as well as some of the best children's hospitals in the country. And I cannot tell you how remarkable that is given the setting we started in," says DiBardino. "It has been a little overwhelming at times, but it has been worth it. To be in a position where you are not just helping the patients you are operating on and their families, but really the whole state because we are offering something that they have never had before and that's sustainable."

Salazar adds, "I believe this program will be the most important thing that I do. Not only in achieving excellent outcomes, but bringing that same high standard to Mississippi and for Mississippi to be able to take care of its own in a way that's equal to the very best programs in the country. I feel really fortunate to be a part of that." M

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