

SCIENCE CENTER
UT HEALTH



Cardiothoracic Surgery

Calhoon

Dr. Calhoon Man of Heart

[BY: CORI SMELKER]

[PHOTOGRAPHY: JACOB RODRIGUEZ-CALL]

Some boys run from the family business. Others embrace it. Thoracic surgeon Dr. John Calhoon is one who embraced what his father does for a living. “I remember watching my dad perform heart and lung surgeries and I absolutely fell in love with it,” he recalls. “There were even times when he’d allow me to scrub in with him. I was all of 15 or 16 years old, and he would let me watch. I was fascinated with what he could do; and the fact that he could make an immediate difference to the lives of his patients.” Not only was he enthralled with the actual work, but he also saw how much his patients loved and respected his father.

Today, if you can sit Dr. Calhoon down long enough to talk to him, you discover a man filled with passion — not just to ‘fix’ people but to educate a new generation of thoracic surgeons.

That is why he chooses to work in the Division of Thoracic Surgery at the University of Texas Health Science Center. “I enjoy the challenge of working with the students. It keeps me young and on my toes,” claims this vibrant blond doctor. “We get to look at the latest technologies and implement them.” Dr. Calhoon loves practicing in San Antonio and has no plans to go anywhere else. “We have some of the finest teaching facilities in the world, right here.”

When one thinks of thoracic surgery, one tends to think of the heart, but it extends much further than that, according to Dr. Calhoon. “It includes the lungs, the windpipe, and all the great vessels,” Dr. Calhoon does have a subspecialty — pediatric heart surgery. However he has, and still does everything from heart bypass surgery, to heart or lung transplants and everything in between. “These days though, my lab coat says ‘Cardiothoracic’ because my patients are mostly heart patients; and if they don’t see the name ‘cardio’ somewhere in my title, they feel uncomfortable.”

His excitement at seeing positive results has never died down. “The outcome is always important, to me, to the patient and ultimately is the bottom line. It behooves me to be the best doctor and educator I can be, to ensure that new cardiothoracic doctors are even better.” Money has never been the deciding factor in Dr. Calhoon’s decision to practice medicine. “Trust me, as an educator I am making far less than others who are in my field,” he chuckles.

When he is not in the Operating Room (which he confesses does rule his life) Dr. Calhoon can be found in a variety of places. He does his rounds, takes conference calls, and teaches. He is also a member of the Executive Committee and the Examination Chair of the American Board of Thoracic Surgery. He sees this as a great honor and privilege because at the end of the day he answers to the general public. “It is up to us as an examination committee to certify great doctors, ones who are professional and are the very best.”

Dr. Calhoon has seen many changes in his 20 years of practicing thoracic surgery. One aspect is in the improvement of positive outcomes, but another is how surgery has become less invasive. Being able to teach new methods to students is equally thrilling to him. “Medicine is like a typewriter. At one time there was only one way to produce a typed document, but now we have many ways. Thoracic medicine is changing in the same way, and we need to not just keep, but set the pace with education.”



Dr. Calhoon instructs a resident, Dr. Adham Saad

His hard work ethic was drilled into him as a young boy. “My father could have given my brother and me everything we wanted, but he made us work for most things.” He recalls very clearly the summer he was 12 years old. Dr. Calhoon and his younger brother got the bright idea of buying a lawn mower and then mowing lawns in the neighborhood to make money. The only drawback to this epiphany was that their father was not prepared to just go out and buy them a lawnmower. Instead he got an old beat-up push mower from a neighbor, sharpened the blades and told the boys they could mow their lawn and he would pay them until they saved enough money to buy the mower they would really need. “But the mower was so old and heavy, it took the two of us to push it,” Dr. Calhoon says. “Anyway, we spent the rest of the summer mowing our half acre, and our Dad would pay us.” By the end of summer they had made \$60 — enough for a cheaper mower he and his brother had their eyes on, but the lawnmower their father recommended cost over \$120, so they continued mowing for the rest of the year and by Christmas they had made \$119. After Christmas the mower went on sale for \$120. “But we were \$1 short, and we still needed to pay the sales tax on it. The tax was not a lot, a couple of dollars, but the fact is, we were short. Dad kindly said he would chip

in the rest. We went to the store and came home with this great mower. Let me tell you, that mower netted us thousands of dollars in the next few years!”

Working his way through college was something that was expected as well. Dr. Calhoon spent many a hot Texas summer on the roofs of homes replacing old roofs. “I’d come home from a day outside, smothered in tar. I’d take a shower, eat some food and then collapse.” He sees the advantages to having worked hard to get where he is today. “I appreciated not getting everything handed to me on a golden platter. And I also decided I never wanted to be a roofer or involved in construction!” Dr. Calhoon does love to work with his hands though, and has a workshop in his garage where he does what he calls tinkering. “I have made a few things for our home, like sconces, beds, mantels and even some tables.” If there are house repairs to be done he does them as well. It definitely seems like this surgeon’s hands are capable of carrying out a variety of projects!

ese are the kinds of ethics Dr. Calhoon and his wife, Sarah Lucero, want to pass on to their two boys, Satchel (9), and Stetson (7). Lucero, the 6 p.m. and 10 p.m. news anchor at KENS 5, knows all about hard work as well. Her family, who lived in San Antonio, would go to Mexico every summer to spend time with extended family. “She didn’t grow up with many privileges,” claims Dr. Calhoon, “but she never let that stop her from reaching her goals and having the drive and determination to succeed.”

Lucero and Dr. Calhoon have plenty in common, even though they are in completely different professional fields. “I started out as a pre-med student,” says this poised, beautiful brunette, “however; I took a detour into the world of media and never returned.” Although she never thought she would be a news anchor she recalls many of her friends at college telling her that they thought she would be perfect for the job in front of the camera. “I suppose they were right,” she says. Lucero has been news anchor with KENS 5 now for 10 years and before that worked as a news anchor for CBS affiliate in Chicago. She also, early in her career, took a job as a sportscaster for Univision, here in San Antonio. “I love sports so it seemed a natural job to do,” she laughs.

So, how do two busy professionals make time for their family and for themselves? “Date night for the two of us is every Saturday evening. We are very careful to take one night during the week as a date night as well. We are committed to making time for each other,” Lucero says. “Our schedules are the total oppo-

site,” she expounds. “But it works out. After John goes to work, I get to be with the boys and go to school functions and be involved in the classroom. John gets to be with them in the evening, while I am at work.” Being a hands-on dad is extremely important to Dr. Calhoon, who spends time in the evenings with the boys on homework, sports, or a combination when time permits. He is also the one who gets them up in the morning, and gets them ready for school.

Athletics are a focal point for both parents and their two boys. Lucero is a marathon runner and Dr. Calhoon loves to play golf. He actually had a golf scholarship in college, and is excited that his boys are now old enough to play. His favorite golf course? “St. Andrews; although, because it is in Scotland I’ve only played it once. However we play the golf course in our sub-division, and enjoy that one too.”

Not only is this heart surgeon concerned with the well-being



Dr. Calhoon with his wife, Sarah Lucero and his sons, (left to right) Stetson and Satchel

and health of his patients, he has turned his attention to the environment and the future health of the planet. He admits that he used to own a big truck, but he sold it several years ago because he wants to ensure he is doing his part to make the world a cleaner place for his own children. He confesses he misses his truck but loves his hybrid. “Especially with the gas prices the way they are right now! I think we have a respon-

sibility to ourselves and to future generations to be respectful of our

planet and do all we can to not make things worse than they already are.”

Dr. Calhoon acknowledges that he juggles many plates, and they are constantly spinning. Trying to carve out time for himself is sometimes hard, as so many other people and things demand his attention. But he also acknowledges that he loves the choices he has made that have brought him to this point. “My wife and my boys complete me. I am fully committed to them, and to our students and patients. At the end of the day, I can reflect and be grateful for how well life has treated me. I am thankful to be in my profession, to enjoy what I do, and to love my family and know that love is returned.”

He grabs his lab coat as the interview draws to a close because his next appointment is waiting. With a quick wave goodbye he quickly walks down the corridor to go and consult with his next patient. Dr. Calhoon, in this way, brings hope, health and new heart to patients all over San Antonio. **N**