ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

Thank you so much. You all are so generous. That presentation was amazing. Obviously I knew this was coming, but I didn’t know THAT was coming.

I am so honored to be up here tonight. It is really very special to stand in front of all of those from both the medical community and the civic community that have made my job so rewarding and in a larger sense made our program so successful, and I hope, helpful to the community.

I have been here 25 years, now, and the Heart Ball is a tradition that began about that time and has seen outstanding honorees. Standing among them tonight is daunting. George, Tom, Tom Jividen, and all the rest; all having made outstanding contributions. I remember being responsible for organizing one of these occasions many years ago with the capable help of June Britt and Rei Godsey and many others. We decided to have it out at Northcoate Farm, in the facility where Al Stroobants had his cattle auction barn and a large meeting area. Some of you may remember that occasion. And I recall Fulton Johnson as the honoree, giving an outstanding acceptance speech with most of us almost rolling in the aisles. I remember thinking to myself, “Boy, I hope I NEVER win that award and have to follow Fulton at the podium.”

Hopefully time has past and you have forgotten the really capable speakers of the past years.

I want to emphasize tonight that this heart surgery thing is a team sport. I have had a lot of help over the years, including all those previous honorees.

You know there was a time when I was a heart surgeon just looking for a job. I was in a group practice in St. Louis. My brother, Paul, is a heart surgeon as well, as you may know, and his practice in Roanoke was operating on most of the patients from Lynchburg. His encouraging comment to me was: “Well, they’re going to start a program in Lynchburg and take those patients away, so it might as well be you.” The reality was that his reputation helped me get the job and he and his team in Roanoke were extremely helpful in our starting this program. I could not ever have asked for a better advisor and helpful colleague than Paul. I have continued to lean on him over the years because there are always conundrums that you need help with and having a more experienced and smarter surgeon close by who happened to be your brother is just amazing. And don’t worry, Paul, I have almost forgotten that you didn’t show up for the first case like you were supposed too. Car trouble kept him away but we struggled on.

Judy and my two girls, Kelly and Mary Katherine have been an intergral part of this. Judy was pregnant when we moved to Lynchburg, so I was asking a lot for her to relocate from St. Louis to a small town, still far away from any of her family. In fact, Judy actually got me this job. When I came for my second visit I was struck by what would be politely called a viral illness. Facing the all-important dinner interview with all the Cardiologists and their wives, I stayed behind in the hotel and Judy had a grand old time with the whole group, thus sealing the deal for me. But she has been my strength and she tries to be my protector. She had a wonderful career as a nurse and fortunately understood some of the demands of this job and has been incredibly supportive and tolerant.

Kelly and Mary Katherine tolerated and perhaps enjoyed my limited presence. I made them both come into the hospital on occasion and each came into the operating room once to observe. Kelly made the determination to never, never, ever, get into a medical field. So of course she is now an oncology nurse at Emory. Mary Katherine switched places with her, having been interested in medicine, but now finding her place in retail and business where she will undoubtedly make her mark. Congratulations, girls, on making it in spite of Dad.

It was an exciting time as we started. I was blessed with having 3 people come from St. Louis to help me: 2 nurses, Sue Gately and Carol Oliver and a perfusionsist, Tim Buzzelli. Luckily Rick Milam, a cardiac surgery PA was willing to move from Florida and take a chance with a new program. And then I had this outstanding group of young nurses in OR who were willing to take on the adventure of doing heart surgery, starting at Virginia Baptist. 3 of them are still working in our OR 25 years later and will tell you wildly exaggerated stories of how demanding and difficult I was as we started out. They stuck, however, and have been an intergral part of our success.

It was the ideal situation with great nurses, a perfusionist, a PA, supportive administration with Karen Darnell leading the way for us. We had a wonderful group of Cardiologists with whom we formed a rather unique (at least for surgeons and cardiologists) cooperative bond.

And I have to give thanks to John Bell who soon joined us from his practice in Las Vegas. I miss him still and he hasn’t been replaced. He contributed energy, innovation and a commitment to excellence that was so important to us. I thank Michelle for getting him to Lynchburg and also to Tatum and Connor for sharing him with us.

Looking forward, we are in great shape. Chuck Mulligan is doing an outstanding job with our lung surgery program, adding expertise we just couldn’t offer prior to his arrival. And I am proud to introduce our two new heart surgeons tonight as well. By “new” I mean really new since they both just arrived this week. We are fortunate to have 2 experienced, very capable surgeons in town to join us. I am very pleased that Ken Saum and his wife Liz are coming back to Lynchburg. After leaving he had a career in the Army and then practiced in \_\_\_\_\_\_\_and then most recently in Winchester. As Ken interviewed and we walked around the hospital recently, the staff who knew him from his previous time here couldn’t contain their enthusiasm with “are you coming back, are you coming back, Dr. Saum?” So I know you will be well received. Houman Tavaf and his wife Kim Lankford are going to be a great addition to our community. Dr. Tavaf’s career has also been in the military and when I visited his OR at Walter Reed I was impressed with not only Houman, but the respect he had of all of his staff and colleagues. Welcome to Lynchburg.

There has been an interesting debate in recent years over “American exceptionalism”. Are we really qualitatively different as a country than the rest of the world? Well what about “Lynchburg exceptionalism” ? As a medical community are we really different? There is some anecdotal evidence to that effect, and objective measures such as the Dartmouth cooperative that says it may be true. The reality is we are probably exceptionally good at some things and just OK at other things. If it is true in some arenas, what really is the difference? Those of us who are physicians or other medical professionals may have been in other communities and may see a difference. Those of you who are not may have had medical care in other places and I hope you see a difference. If there is something there, I think it must be about the individual care of the patient rather than facilities or any unique capabilities. We all know that there are changes in medicine and a lot more to come. A lot if it is finding efficiencies. In many cases, that means the care is provided by the system, rather than an individual doctor. You may have taken your chances with that individual doctor, but if you got lucky, you could count on him or her. More and more you will need to count on the system. The hope is that the system will be comprehensive, evidence-based and consistently good. The question will be whether the patient in still at the center of the whole equation. My only commentary on this that the joy that I have experienced as physician has come in large part from the personal connections with those individual patients and working with dedicated staff who share a common mission of putting the patient first. Now I know as a surgeon, I don’t get to follow patients over the long haul, but there is something special about the relationship that just comes with the territory.

So as we go forward, finding new ways to organize our care and improve the quality and consistency of what we do, we need to always be asking “What is the best thing for the patient?” We should have confidence that that is the right question whether it’s a strategic question for Centra, or a question at the patient’s bedside.

The correct answer to that question is the correct answer. Period.

Now I am different from the rest of you. I didn’t pay for my table.

I want to assure all of you that it is worth it. Thank you for your dedication to cardiac care in this community. I can assure you we are doing everything we can to provide the best possible care in Lynchburg. I want it to be there for you, me and our families. I appreciate all of your support and thank you for this particular honor.