All About Heart

Dr. Elijah Beaty, Assistant Professor in Cardiac Electrophysiology at Wake Forest Baptist Health School of Medicine

Elijah H. Beaty is all about heart; in every sense of the word. As Assistant Professor in Cardiac Electrophysiology at Wake Forest Baptist Health School of Medicine, Dr. Beaty spends his days immersed in the care of adult patients with complicated heart problems. Though passionate about all things cardiovascular, his commitment and dedication to helping people runs even deeper and has its roots in his hometown of Winston-Salem.

"I was fortunate to have the tools and influences in my life that I did," Beaty admits. "I had two loving parents (James A. Beaty, Jr., U.S. District Judge, Middle District of North Carolina and Toy Townsend Beaty) who cared for, supported, and challenged me. When friends were going to basketball or sports camps, they urged me to attend math and science camps. That's where my love of science came from and I knew that I wanted a career that clearly would help people."

Beaty credits a strong "network of older adults and peers who were always striving" to improve themselves and those around them for shaping his future, but is quick to add that one of the most influential factors in his youth was the Boy Scouts. "Troop 916 of the United Metropolitan Missionary Baptist Church," recalls Beaty. "The Boy Scouts instilled in me a code of behavior that I now use to conduct my life every day."

With the foundation laid in Winston-Salem, Beaty's studies and career path lead him into new territory—in several ways. "Winston-Salem is home; it's my comfort-zone. But I think everyone needs to get out of their comfort-zone to learn more about themselves and about the world," says Beaty. Leaving his comfort-zone meant going to New Orleans for his residency in internal medicine and then on to Rush University Medical Center in Chicago with fellowships in cardiovascular disease and cardiac electrophysiology.

It was as a fellow in cardiac electrophysiology that Beaty met and was mentored by Dr. Richard Trohman. According to Beaty, Dr. Trohman was instrumental in focusing him in on electrophysiology. "Cardiovascular guys are 'the plumbers of the heart' and electrophysiologists are the 'electricians of the heart.' I became an electrician," states Beaty. Cardiac electrophysiology is the science of understanding, diagnosing, and treating the electrical activities of the heart. These activities influence heart rhythms which may need to start, speed up, slow down, or even out. To regulate these rhythms, Beaty may employ drug therapies, implant pacemakers or defibrillators, or perform studies using a cardiac catheter among other diagnostic and therapeutic options.

While electricians can harken back to Thomas Edison for innovations in their field, cardiac electrophysiology is a relatively new field of practice; one that came about in the late 1970s and early 1980s. "Many of the early practitioners are still around and contributing to the field," notes Beaty. "These are men in their 70's who are still learning, practicing, and sharing their knowledge." And there's a lot to learn especially with technology advancing so quickly. "The devices we're using are getting smaller, more powerful, and smarter—they now communicate detailed information to the doctor without the patient having to do anything; the patient just has to be in a room with a receiver. We're also using 3D technology for catheter placement, reducing the number of x-rays. I think we're moving to a time when a great deal of our work will be done by remote control and we'll eliminate the need for x-rays."

Though cardiac electrophysiology and his return to Winston-Salem are exciting for Beaty on many fronts, life is not without its stressors. His wife, Victoria, is a dentist in Charlotte so the two must juggle work commitments, personal time, and drive time. "The one-hour to Charlotte is nothing compared to the four years I had commuting from Chicago; we make it work," says Beaty.

He also faces tough moments in the medical center. "I'm performing invasive procedures on very sick people. It's hard when you lose a patient whether it's during a procedure or someone you've been treating for a long time. When it happens, I try to remind myself it's the quality of life instead of the number of years that's important; and, I want to make things better when I can," Beaty reflects. "With electrophysiology there is a potential cure for some conditions." That promise of a cure, of really helping people, is one aspect of his job Beaty keeps constantly in mind and close to his heart. At the end of the day, his greatest satisfaction is "seeing the families and patient smile after a successful procedure; knowing they feel better." As Beaty says, "That's when I know I truly made a positive impact on someone's life."