

The Man with Two Hearts

Following Transplant, Surgeon Dissects Own Heart

By PATTY REINERT

Copyright Houston Chronicle

TEXARKANA, Texas – You could say Dr. Roy Selby takes his work to heart. Then again, you could say he takes his heart to work – in a Tupperware container.

Selby, who received a heart transplant from a 13-year-old girl last year, asked to keep his old heart, hoping it would come in handy someday. This year, he dug it out of the garage and took it to Texarkana College, where he dissected it for his anatomy and physiology students.

“It’s like a child and a toy,” explained Selby, 65. “You want to take it apart and see how it works. And I thought the students would be more appreciative if they knew the person whose heart it was.”

For the retired neurosurgeon who admits he likes pathology more than patient care, keeping it was the logical thing to do.

“I’ve had other organs around from time to time, when I was doing research,” he said. “One time I was cleaning out my garage and found two brains.

“I just didn’t want (the heart) to end up in an incinerator unless they offered it to me first,” he said. “The doctors were surprised when I asked if I could have it, but I wanted to see what it looked like. I told the doctor, ‘I want it. It’s a part of me.’”

His surgeon at a Little Rock, Ark., hospital sent his secretary in search of the organ shortly after Selby awoke from the operation last April. “He brought it to me in a Tupperware container,” Selby said last week.

Selby said he was shocked to find out more than two decades ago that he had hereditary heart disease.

Doctors tried medication and operations, but nothing helps.

At one point when he was close to death following a heart attack, Selby said, he saw fluorescent lights and heard a beautiful woman’s voice whispering to him.

“It was very sweet, soft and tender. I don’t know what she was saying, but I felt so good and I didn’t want to wake up,” he remembered. After that, he said, he wasn’t afraid of dying.

But the neurosurgeon had a purely scientific explanation for the voice. “Hypoxia,” he said. “Not enough oxygen getting to the brain.”

By the time someone suggested a transplant, Selby’s breathing was so labored that he slept with an oxygen tank. His doctor had told him his chances of getting a new heart were not good.

“So I quit worrying,” Selby said.

When a heart became available, he said, he was reluctant to be pushed to the front of the transplant line. “But there was the question of my dying,” he said.

As for his old heart? When he finished dissecting it, he sewed it back together and returned it to its plastic container.

“I need to find a glass specimen jar to appropriately store it,” he said. “Then I’m going to put it on my mantle.”

First published in the Houston Chronicle.