



➤ **Dr. Vaughn Starnes**

"Best Doctors in America"  
*Woodward & White*

"Best Heart Doctors in America"  
*Good Housekeeping* magazine

"Best Doctors in the United States"  
*American Health* magazine

"Best Doctors in Los Angeles"  
*Los Angeles* magazine

"Best Pediatric Specialists in Los Angeles"  
*L.A. Parent* magazine



# Healing Hearts

Preeminent surgeon Dr. Vaughn Starnes is a quiet hero—and a Pasadena resident—who is mending bodies and saving lives.

// STORY BY SARAH HAUFRECT

BEFORE 1992, A BABY WHO WAS BORN WITH AN UNDEVELOPED LEFT CHAMBER IN HIS OR HER HEART WAS CONSIDERED A LOST CAUSE. A FAMILY WAITING TO WELCOME THEIR CHILD INTO THE WORLD HAD NO CHOICE BUT TO WATCH THIS NEW LIFE BE EXTINGUISHED IN A MATTER OF DAYS. BUT THIS WAS BEFORE DR. VAUGHN STARNES. THE NORWOOD PROCEDURE, THE METHOD USED TO REPAIR THIS RARE CONDITION, IS ONE OF THE MANY EXPERT TECHNIQUES PIONEERED IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA BY DR. STARNES. THE CARDIOTHORACIC SURGEON HAS PERFORMED

many firsts in the field of transplantation as well, including transplanting a heart and lung into a four-month-old baby—the youngest organ recipient ever. In 1993, he became the first surgeon to perform a living-related lobar lung transplant for a patient with cystic fibrosis, taking lung tissue from each parent and transplanting it into their child. Since 1993,

Starnes has performed more living-related lung transplants in children than any other surgeon.

Considered one of the most accomplished surgeons in his field, Starnes has brought life, hope and a legacy of service to Childrens Hospital Los Angeles, where he is director of the Heart Institute and head of the division of cardiothoracic surgery; to Keck School of

Medicine at USC, where he is Hastings Distinguished Professor of Cardiothoracic Surgery and chair of the department of surgery; and to the city of Pasadena, where he has made his home for more than a decade.

After completing his residency studying under Dr. Norman Shumway (whom Starnes considers his mentor) of Stanford University, Starnes reviewed his options and couldn't think of a better fit than Childrens Hospital. "I wanted to lead my own program and I wanted to pursue adult surgery and pediatric surgery," he recalls. "I also wanted to be in a place where teaching is top priority. So with its nationally recognized program and close proximity to the Keck School of Medicine at USC, Childrens



**HANDLE WITH CARE.** Left, Davik Teng is met with her mother's overjoyed tears, after her procedure at CHLA to repair the hole in her heart; right, Teng and her family; previous Page, Dr. Starnes in the operating room repairing Teng's heart.

Hospital was a very logical decision." Since then, Starnes has spent most of his time in the operating room or researching heart transplantation, congenital heart surgery and adult-acquired heart disease. He also teaches three to four young surgeons at one time throughout the year, who shadow Starnes and work with him in the most complicated heart procedures—his specialties.

"Teaching future generations is one of the most critical aspects of my work," Starnes says. "I need to lead by example. I think that when my students see my commitment to the work and to others, they understand its importance." Most recently, Starnes has donated his time and expertise to Hearts Without Boundaries, an organization dedicated to providing medical procedures to people from Third World countries, where medicine and surgery are an unattainable luxury."

In 2008, one such surgery made headlines across the nation. Davik Teng, a young girl from Cambodia, was brought to the U.S. with her family to undergo surgery to repair a hole in her heart. Starnes jumped at the opportunity. "We live in a place where Davik's living conditions are something we can't even imagine," he says. "We live in houses in a big city. This child

lives with her family in a grass hut." Teng's heart lesion could have killed her if left untreated, and Cambodia lacked any accessible medical resources to treat it. A surgery that is performed across America every day was Teng's one chance at life.

"You look at a child like Davik Teng—a beautiful, brilliant child—and it becomes a privilege to do what I do," Starnes says. "To give her a normal life expectancy is an unbelievably good feeling."

Davik Teng and her relatives are just one family out of thousands who have been blessed by Starnes' able hand and giving heart. Take the case of Payton Hicks, who was diagnosed with the very condition that in 1992 would have killed her days after birth: The left side of her heart failed to develop. In Starnes' care, Hicks' tiny heart—the size of a small walnut—was operated on using the Norwood procedure. This three-part surgical marathon begins just days after birth with the first surgery, which is followed by another six months later. The final surgery takes place between two and four years depending on the child's development. In Hicks' case, her surgery was performed last December with great success. She was discharged from the hospital two days before

her third birthday.

Or consider the story of Emily Earhart, who was born with an aortic valve disease. At fourteen, Earhart began showing signs of heart failure. Her parents had two choices: either to have a mechanical valve inserted into her heart that would require blood-thinner medications likely to cause problems later in life with puberty and reproduction, or to have Dr. Starnes perform the Ross procedure, in which the pulmonary valve is moved into the aortic position, thereby allowing her natural valve to grow. Many surgeons choose not to perform the Ross procedure because of its demanding nature, but not Dr. Starnes. Earhart's parents opted for it, Starnes happily obliged and Emily Earhart is now a thriving college graduate who recently opened up a champagne and dessert bar in Old Pasadena with her brother and an associate, where she is also the executive pastry chef.

The stories of Davik Teng, Payton Hicks and Emily Earhart were not provided by the patient themselves or by research, but by Starnes himself, who remembers them all and can discuss them years—even decades—afterward in great detail.

"A good surgeon must be a good physician, to know his patients, to hear their stories. Without that, a surgeon is more like a simple, one-dimensional technician and you don't realize the enjoyment of what you do," Starnes says. This must be why the good doctor himself is the one to share the stories of children he treated so long ago. They stay with him, because they are the people whose hearts he has literally touched. And they have touched his in return. ☺