

They've Got Heart

Cardiac surgeon touches many hearts

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If you want to know the secrets of the human heart, ask Dr. Mark Guadagnoli. One of two cardiac surgeons working as part of Heart Center of the Rockies, he's operated on more than 3,000 of them. It's not uncommon for Guadagnoli's patients to write once a year to thank him for saving their lives. But the cardiovascular and thoracic surgeon doesn't think of himself as a lifesaver. "When you do elective or semi-elective surgery, it doesn't feel like you are saving someone's life," he said. "It feels more like flying an airplane."

If something catastrophic happens on the operating table, however, it's another story. "Occasionally we do have a bona fide life-threatening emergency. If you want to know what that feels like, the only thing I can compare it to is white-water kayaking," Guadagnoli said. "The only way to deal with it is to calm down and not make mistakes."

Guadagnoli usually knows what the chances of success are before he goes into surgery. Still, there have been times when he's done everything right and the patient still died. "I can do a bypass, put in a valve and shock the heart, but I can't make it beat if it's not going to beat today," Guadagnoli said.

Working at the boundary between life and death has made Guadagnoli more spiritual, but he's still a "big science nerd," he said. "I think science has its place, but the spiritual side of life is undeniably there."

Guadagnoli lost his father to a heart condition at the age of 3. From an early age, he wanted to go into medicine and always has been fascinated with the heart. But becoming a heart and lung surgeon has come at a price. Schooling - from his undergraduate years through his residencies - took 18 years. A 12-hour day is a short day at the office. And with only two cardiac surgeons in Fort Collins and Loveland, Guadagnoli has been on call every other night and at least every other weekend for 16 years. "My family has paid a price for my career. I'm sure my kids would say 'Dad is out of his mind.'"

Still, he views his profession as a privilege. "We are the guardians of the physical and metaphorical human heart," Guadagnoli said. "On the one hand, we are plumbers. We work on the pump. On the other hand, we are touching people's hearts."

Profile of Dr. Mark Guadagnoli

Age: 51

Profession: Cardiac, thoracic and vascular surgeon, part of the Heart Center of the Rockies surgical division

Years in profession: 25 years from the time he started his surgical training

Family: Wife, Melinda Frye; and three children, Lorin, 20, Jacque, 19, and Nick, 16

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