

HomeGrown: Bill Frist, heart surgeon & former senator

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As a heart surgeon, Bill Frist performed more than 200 transplants. He led the U.S. Senate as majority leader. And, he's provided disaster relief and medical treatment around the globe. 11-18-14 WBIR

As a heart surgeon, Bill Frist performed more than 200 transplants. He led the U.S. Senate as Majority Leader. And, he's provided disaster relief and medical treatment around the globe. His HomeGrown story begins in Middle Tennessee.

(Photo: WBIR)

Story Highlights

- Bill Frist remembers being 6 or 7 and making house calls with his father, a physician.
- Medicine was his family business. In addition to his father, two of his brothers were also doctors
- He went to Harvard Medical School.



From the operating room and Capitol Hill to third world countries, Bill Frist has built his life on saving lives and serving

others.

"I've been blessed in many ways," he said.

The youngest of five children, the heart and lung transplant surgeon and former Senate majority leader credits his father, a doctor, and his mother, a teacher.

"A family with strong values."

And, medicine seemed to be the family business.

"My older brother was a doctor and my middle brother was a doctor. I never really thought about doing anything else," he explained.

Frist remembers being 6 or 7 years old and making house calls with his dad.

"You find somebody who's sick and the lights are dark in bed and then their face lights up when they see dad. That sort of compassion, intimacy, that sort of personal touch is something that has stuck with me forever."

In 1974, against his parents' advice, Frist went to Princeton and majored in public and international affairs.

"It's too liberal, there's too much long hair there," said Frist about his parents opinion of the university then. "But underneath, I always knew I would be a doctor. At that time, I had no earthly idea that I would ever serve in public office or in an appointed position."

Frist went to Harvard Medical School and decided on heart surgery.

"It was a new field and there was the whole future of heart transplants which had never been done and I wanted to be a part of that," he recalled.

He did his residency and surgical training in Boston and studied heart transplants in California. And then, the senator came home to Vanderbilt University Medical Center. Frist and fellow surgeons became the first to perform heart and lung transplants in the Southeast.

After 20 years in medicine and founding Vanderbilt Transplant Center, he felt called to care for the entire community--not just patients.

"I decided the single best way I could take care, address, participate, mainly lift up the health of the community was do the crazy thing of running for the U.S. Senate," he said.

Frist met with his political mentor Howard Baker, Jr. several times.

"And Senator Baker said, 'You know there hasn't been a physician in the U.S. Senate since 1928. There are no doctors in the Senate.'"

Frist not only convinced Senator Baker, but also voters. In 1994, the surgeon traded in scrubs for a suit and went to Washington.

"I remember on the first, literally first day, I got to Washington, stayed at a hotel and asked people where the Hart Building was and started in the wrong direction," he recalled.

But he quickly found his way.

"I started in 1995 as 100th in seniority. I didn't know exactly where it would go. I think 12 years later I left as Senate majority leader. When you leave the U.S. Senate, you reflect on 'did I make a difference.'"

Out of all the legislation, including reducing prescription cost to seniors, Frist is most proud of his influence on stopping the spread of AIDS globally.

"That little virus didn't exist when I was in my internship and in residency. There are 10 million people this second who would not be alive today," he said.

The President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief was an across the aisle effort that included music star power.

"Bono played a great role."

From Bono to Elmo, Senator Frist not only raised awareness for AIDS, but also overall health- even healthy eating. And, he continued using his hands on secret medical missions.

"I say sneak off because obviously our government wouldn't want you to do it-- to go to a part of Southern Sudan which was ravaged by war with millions of people displaced. But if you go in as a surgeon all of a sudden the fighting stops."

Frist also led emergency disaster relief from New Orleans to Haiti. In addition to transplant patients, he's saved many lives from complete strangers on a Florida interstate to then Battalion Commander David Petraeus who was shot during a training exercise.

"Ten years later he was leading the assault on Baghdad in the Iraqi war," he said.

Today, Frist considers himself to be a physician, a policy maker, a teacher, a humanitarian, a healthcare advocate in the private sector and a proponent for education with his SCORE initiative. It's an independent effort to better prepare Tennessee students for college and the workforce.

"I believe education, lifting Tennesseans up, is the most important thing we can do."

Senator Bill Frist,

"I never considered myself a politician."

Born in Nashville. HomeGrown in Tennessee

Side note- When his professional day is done, the senator and surgeon finds time for his other passions-- cycling, running and aviation. He has also authored seven books. His most recent is "A Heart to Serve."