

Born the second of four children to Donald B. and Jessie Mitts, young Donald L. Mitts knew from childhood that education was a high priority in his family. In a day when a college education in rural Grant County was the exception rather than the norm, both of his parents held degrees from the University of Kentucky – his father from the College of Agriculture, and his mother, a registered nurse from the College of Nursing.

Like his parents and older sister, Jan, young Donald also headed to the University of Kentucky after graduating from Grant County High School in 1963 – but registering a bit late, he wound up in the Engineering Department. He took Engineering Sciences his first semester and stood at a drafting table drawing designs all day. “I discovered pretty quickly this wasn’t for me,” he recalls, and adds with a chuckle, “And, my handwriting was a bit too messy to ever be good at it.”

This was the beginning of what became somewhat of a mantra for Dr. Mitts: “Pursue what you like, then do it well.” Having always enjoyed both math and science -- and feeling well prepared based upon excellent teachers and experiences at Grant County High School -- he pursued biology and physical science. This, combined with his interest in people (an awareness hugely influenced by his mother), established the foundation for what became a phenomenal career as a cardiac, vascular, and thoracic surgeon in the Cincinnati region.

The road to surgeon, however, was longer than other pathways in medicine, and certainly not an easy one - - with four years of undergraduate work, four years of medical school, one year of residency (at U.K.), and work weeks through most of his training that stretched anywhere from 70 to 120 hours. Along the way, he briefly “dabbled at” neurosurgery, but ultimately chose heart surgery. “I liked the challenge of figuring out the puzzle and figuring it out quickly.”

After graduating medical school in 1971, Dr. Mitts was offered a fellowship at the University of Texas, working under Dr. Denton Cooley. “Dr. Cooley was renowned and had patients from all over the world,” states Dr. Mitts. “The opportunity to work with him was a huge honor.” Dr. Mitts served as Chief Resident while at the University Of Texas, and for 5 years took call every other night. “It was an all-consuming, but amazing, unparalleled experience.”

In 1978, Dr. John B. Flege (another Grant County High School graduate and fellow Distinguished Alumni) recruited Dr. Mitts back to Christ Hospital in Cincinnati. There, he was provided opportunities to teach at the University of Cincinnati and Christ Hospitals, and gave consideration to academic medicine, but “flat out loved surgery.” He explained, “You’d see someone walk into your clinic, who just weeks before had been transported to the hospital via ambulance at death’s door. That is so very satisfying.”

Dr. Mitts also enjoyed watching family dynamics and the love demonstrated by families navigating difficult situations. In all, there were over 18,000 surgeries (heart, carotids, kidneys and more) over 34 years. He admits, “The emotional component, when you are doing this type of work, is huge.”

Dr. Mitts retired in 2015 after cataracts caused little spells of blurry vision. “I had special loops and my vision always cleared, but you can’t wait when your patient is on a heart machine. I loved every second of my career, but it was the right thing to do.” As he looks back, he acknowledges being blessed with a huge amount of energy. In addition to work, we did all the family things, played sports, coached, the works, but I never gave the schedule or the pressure of my job a second thought. I just loved what I was doing.”

And that is his advice to the next generation: Value education. Maximize your options and opportunities. Do your job well, and love what you do. And, as a final tribute to the tremendous influence of his mother, he adds, “If you have a mother anything like mine, listen to her and make her proud.”