Dr. George Magovern, a true Pittsburgher.
Courtesy of George Magovern.

Dr. George Magovern
Cardio thoracic surgeon George Magovern thinks of himself as a true Pittsburgher, and we thank him for that—from the heart. His innovations include the Magovern-Cromie sutureless heart valve, a low-pressure endotracheal tube called the Lanz Device, development and clinical use of a small centrifugal pump as a ventricular assist device, and the nation’s first cardiomyoplasty procedure. Magovern’s legacy is not just in the medical books—it has legs. His patients are walking testament to his accomplishments.

Growing up in Brooklyn, Magovern always wanted to be a physician. After joining the Navy’s V-12 program and completing undergraduate studies, he attended medical school at Milwaukee’s Marquette University.

Returning to New York, Magovern married Ann Walsh and began his medical training at Kings County Hospital. With international conflicts brewing after the Korean War, Magovern went into the service, and during his army surgery training became passionate about thoracic surgery.

By 1957, Magovern finished his residency in thoracic and cardiovascular surgery at George Washington University, the last six months of which were spent at Pittsburgh’s Allegheny General Hospital. “They asked me to stay on in Pittsburgh,” he says, “and the rest is history.”

Delighted by the opportunity to raise his family here, Magovern worked full time under Dr. Ed Kent performing cardiac valve replacement surgeries, but he was discontented: “The results of valve surgery were very bad. We were losing eight out of 10 patients. When I told Dr. Kent how unhappy I was about it, he basically said, ‘Well, why don’t you try and fix it?’ I went into a lab at Pitt and for a year worked with Harry Cromie, a Pitt engineer. We built a valve and tried it out on 20 patients, and 19 of them survived. That changed my life,” Magovern notes. He reversed the surgery’s 90 percent fatality rate to a 90 percent survival rate.

For 25 years Magovern chaired the Department of Surgery at Allegheny General. An author, mentor, and educator—he even instilled a tradition of medicine in his own family. “I’ve accomplished a fair amount in my career and that intrigued my sons to go on into the medical field,” he says. “There are at least nine doctors in our family.”

Now retired, Magovern’s career continues to inspire individuals worldwide. The story of his accomplishments, housed at the History Center’s Library & Archives, is also featured in the exhibition Pittsburgh: A Tradition of Innovation. Due to a generous major gift from the Magovern Family Foundation, two galleries are also named in his family’s honor.

Lori Dernus, who has worked with the Magoverns for more than two decades, recalled when Dr. Magovern became involved with the History Center as a benefactor: “I remember walking with him through the History Center in hardhats when it was still under construction,” says Dernus. “He felt that the city of Pittsburgh had given so much to him and he felt good about being able to give something back.”

Lori was with Dr. Magovern and his wife Ann on the opening night of the Innovators exhibition. “He said to me, ‘Wow I really did all those things. I was so proud of him.’”

For more information on how you can make a planned gift to the History Center’s Endowment fund, please contact Audrey Brouman, Fundraising Counsel to the History Center, at (412) 454-6404.

George and Ann Magovern at the History Center’s annual 1879 Founders’ Circle Dinner this past winter.
Photo Suellen Fitzsimmons.