



# Albert Starr, M.D.,

on the importance of philanthropy  
to help create a world-class  
health care system

INTERVIEW BY KRIS CALDWELL • PHOTOS BY BRUCE FORSTER

Renowned cardiac surgeon, Lasker Award recipient and inventor Albert Starr, M.D., has contributed a lifetime of achievement to the advancement of medicine. Today his passion is to inspire our contributions. Private sector gifts, big and small, are all-important to the process of medical discovery. Dr. Starr invites us to help transform the world of medicine through our generosity.

## Why is Providence worthy of philanthropic support?

Our Mission from the beginning was to go beyond the bottom line to treat the sick and take care of the poor and vulnerable with compassionate treatment. To provide that care, we had to build hospitals that are run very effectively using the latest management and industrial technologies.

Our Mission and effective operations attract top physicians and researchers and a large volume of patients. With



these ingredients and adequate funding, Providence is positioned to become one of very few major centers in the nation for translational research.

## What is translational research, and why is it important?

Translational research is a dynamic process of scientific discovery. Basic research findings from our labs are applied to clinical patient care, and results from patient care are reported back to the labs to refine the original findings.

Having a hospital that conducts a vigorous amount of translational research is a real benefit to the community. Translational research allows us to rapidly apply things that

we already know in biological science to actual treatment in increasingly effective ways.

## But numerous health care organizations make compelling cases for funding. How does a person choose?

One option is to give to mature research organizations that are quite stable and at the top of the heap. And there's nothing wrong with that.

The option that I would think is the most exciting, aside from the emotional aspects of dealing with a particular disease in one's family, is the situation where your contribution could literally transform an up-and-coming institution that has enormous potential. You have to be assured though that your funding is going to build a sustainable platform for major research efforts. I believe that Providence fits that bill.

Providence is ready, from our past performance and our current management, to make a giant step through very large gifts. It's a perfect spot for major gifts, and I think it would be very satisfying for donors to know that their donation made such a big difference.

## Describe the philanthropic role you have at Providence.

As the director of academic affairs for Providence Health & Services in Oregon, I oversee the academic elements that exist within our health



system. The academic elements are the space, people and desire to explore new frontiers in medicine. These elements have to be incubated, and to incubate requires funding.

Some might think revenues from the practice of medicine alone are enough to support it. However, one-third of all hospitals are losing money, one-third are even and one-third have a little left over at the end of the year. None are swimming in wealth to support the growth in research and teaching in medicine.

So the academic elements in medicine require research grants from the government, which is quite limited in what it can do. That is why we look to the private sector – individuals, companies and private foundations – for support.

## What do you enjoy about this philanthropic role?

I most enjoy making a connection with another person – intellectually and emotionally. It's very gratifying to satisfy a donor's intellectual interest with new information about medicine and biology that he or she may not have been able to access.

In addition, it's important to be in tune with the donor's emotional makeup. For exam-

ple, does the donor have a close bond with someone who has cancer? And as a result, does the donor want to do something about that particular disease?

## Aside from its impact on the advancement of medicine, what drives your passion for philanthropy?

We have to recognize that we're seeing in our lifetime massive wealth development. An enormous amount of wealth has been created just since World War II, and at an accelerated pace in the '80s and '90s.

What are we going to do with all this wealth? That's the big question. We can gear it to affluent living, or use it to make life better for everyone.



We're doing a service for people by allowing them to channel huge sums of wealth into activities that are very humane. The result is they feel that their efforts to accumulate wealth were worth it – not only in terms of the way they are able to live, but also the ways in which they benefit others. ■