

# The Distinguished Alumnus: Charles Fraser, Jr., M.D., B.S., 1980

HEALTH, Q&A, MATHEMATICS, ALUMNI

Surgeon-in-Chief at Texas Children's Hospital in Houston. Interviewed by Marc Airhart.

**You pioneered the use of ventricular assist devices, mechanical pumps that help weakened hearts maintain blood flow, in children. What impact have these devices had?**

Their nutrition improves, their overall physiology improves and, when a donor heart comes along, they have a better chance of doing well with a transplant. For some patients, if we can reduce the workload of their heart for a period of time, their heart will actually recover and we can remove the device. We're also starting to see patients live with these devices indefinitely. We have several children who have been on the device for years now and are passing developmental milestones and going to school with a mechanical device supporting their circulation.

**These devices have saved thousands of lives. How does it feel to be part of that story?**

It's one of the most gratifying professional experiences I've had. It's invigorating, and it gives us energy and enthusiasm to push harder for the next level of improvement. Getting to build a children's congenital heart center has been enormously satisfying and that was a pretty radical concept when we first introduced it in 1995, that you would have an entire center focused entirely on children with heart disease; but it has been enormously successful. We have little babies being flown in to be cared for from all over, and to know that we're fielding a team that's just at the top of their game, I'm the most proud of that professionally.



Credit: Wyatt McSpadden

**Why do you do this work?**

I'm in that stage of my career now where I have cared for thousands of patients. I've gotten to know them and gotten to watch them develop and grow. I've been invited into their families. I get cards and pictures and letters and graduation announcements, and now I'm getting wedding invitations. To get to participate in those people's lives, it's an incredible blessing. On top of that, I get to work with the most motivated people to do good that you could find anywhere. They come here just to take care of people's children. They're energized, they're tenacious, they're passionate. It's a great environment.

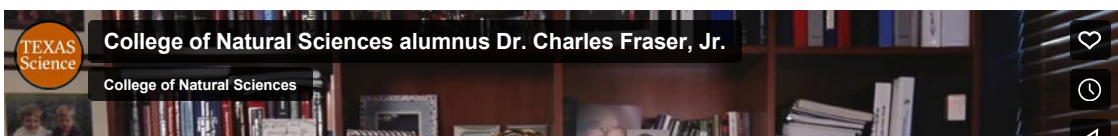
**Your father-in-law, Dr. Denton Cooley, was also a pioneer in heart surgery, as well as a UT Austin alumnus. What has been his legacy in the field?**



He's one of, if not the, person who opened the door on all this, and the things that he did when no one else thought it could be done still boggle my mind. He gave us the courage to take on problems that no one would ever have conceptualized. A lot of the things we do routinely have his DNA in them: the instruments we use, the way we use the heart-lung bypass machine, the approach to certain problems. You can feel his presence all over many of the things we do.

[Read our extended interview with Dr. Fraser and his tribute to Dr. Denton Cooley.](#)

Heart surgeons who leave a family legacy, Fraser and Cooley in 2011. Credit: Texas Children's Hospital



College of Natural Sciences alumnus Dr. Charles Fraser, Jr.

College of Natural Sciences



*College of Natural Sciences alumnus Dr. Charles Fraser, Jr., helps save lives as a pediatric surgeon, having pioneered the use of new technologies in the littlest heart patients.*



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