

## WINCHESTER'S GOLDEN GRADUATES

### *Classmate to class act: Bob Painter*

By Daly Walker

In May of 1968, Everett Thomas, a 47 year-old accountant with deteriorating heart valves, was near death. A team of cardiac surgeons at Baylor University Medical Center in Texas lead by the world renowned Dr. Denton Cooley, harvested the heart of a 15 year old girl who had committed suicide. They replaced Thomas' failing heart with the girl's healthy organ. The miraculous procedure was the first successful heart transplant done in the United States. The operation captured the imagination of the world and was featured in a spread in *Life Magazine*. A member of Cooley's famous team was a tall, sandy-haired young surgeon from Winchester, Indiana. His name is Bob Painter.

Bob grew up in a comfortable Greek Revival brick home in the shade of maple trees that lined South Main Street in Winchester. He was raised by his mother, Lillian, a tall cultured woman in wire-rimmed glasses and his father, Dr. Lowell Painter, who for many years was one of Winchester's leading family practitioners. Bob describes the neighborhood where he grew up as enormously important — a rich, supportive environment where his home always welcomed visitors. Bob's younger sister Jane, a bright student and talented cellist, graduated from Winchester High School and attended Oberlin College and graduated from Indiana University. Jane died tragically and prematurely of a ruptured brain aneurysm. Bob remains close to the two children his sister left behind. He named one of his daughters Jane who named her daughter Lillian for his mother.

Bob was a typical boy of the heartland, riding his bike on dusty country roads through the corn and soy bean fields of Randolph County, shooting hoops on the Youth Center's asphalt court, or cooling off on hot summer days in Goodrich Park's big saucer-shaped swimming pool.

Bob says of being raised in Winchester: "I've always been glad I started life in that type of town: safe everywhere, friends from many backgrounds, the

chance to participate in athletics (a good atmosphere although perhaps a little over-emphasized!), surrounding rural areas which we could explore on bikes, a clock in the courthouse tower that helped to get us home on time for supper, and a great swimming pool!”

As a teenager, Bob was an outstanding student and a commanding figure in the halls of Winchester High School. Six foot three and muscular, he was a fine athlete, earning letters as a center in basketball and a tackle on the football team. Vincent Guenther was his coach in both sports.

Bob says of Guenther, “He was a strong willed coach and was an enormous influence on me — perfectionist, a strong guide for admirable personal behavior and excellence, a penchant for knowing and installing an appreciation and ability to perform fundamentals, and a firm supporter of those who followed the rules.”

Following his graduation from Winchester High School, Bob attended Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana where he continued to excel athletically and academically, receiving the college’s Scholar-athlete Award and serving as class president. He earned his MD from Indiana University Medical School. His surgical residency was at prestigious Hartford Hospital in Connecticut. After completing his surgical training, Bob entered the Air Force where he was Chief of Surgery at the base in Warner Robbins, GA. After completing his military obligation, he entered the thoracic surgery fellowship at Baylor University under the tutelage of both Dr. Denton Cooley and the renowned pioneer of heart and vascular surgery, Dr. Michael DeBakey

On completion of his surgical training, Bob entered private practice at Day Kimball Hospital in Northeast Connecticut where he practiced for 25 years before moving to Hartford. There he served as Director of the Department of Surgery at Saint Francis Hospital and Medical Center and was a member of the University of Connecticut School of Medicine’s faculty. Bob retired from the operating room at age 65, but he continued in a teaching role, mentoring aspiring surgeons on how to match their future careers and their personal lives.

Civic minded, Bob tended to matters of the heart figuratively as well as literally. He served on the Hartford City Council as well as the governor’s Board of Mental Health and Addiction Services. Bob attributes his call to service to his up-bringing in Winchester. He says, “having significant older advisers, parents, and mentors available is important and that is a role teachers, youth leaders and other adults can take to encourage, guide, and lift kids up.” He challenges those

who are older to “step up to the plate and volunteer to be available to young folks” the way the town elders were to him.

Still fit with bright, kind and intelligent eyes and thinning hair, Bob is now retired and lives in Hartford with his Hoosier wife, Nancy Macy from Henry County. He regrets that he has no remaining family in Randolph county to visit.

Everett Thomas lived another seven months with the new heart Bob helped transplant into his chest. The Phoenix accountant was one of many whose lives were saved or enhanced by Bob Painter’s surgical skills and his humanitarian spirit that had its beginning in Winchester, Indiana.