

Heart to Heart

By Nancy Sokoler Steiner

The Big Kahuna informs Penny Lane that he has checked in with Wheels and Gumby. They've OK'd him to lead a handful of young campers and their counselors on an impromptu kayak ride during rest hour.



Dr. Kevin Shannon co-founded Camp del Corazón, a sleep-away summer camp on Catalina Island for children with heart disease.

Photo: Ann Johansson

On the mainland, he may be known as Kevin Shannon, MD (RES '90, FEL '93), associate professor of pediatrics at the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA. But on Catalina Island, about 20 miles off the coast of Los Angeles, he answers to Big Kahuna, his handle at Camp del Corazón, a sleep-away summer camp for children with heart disease that he started in 1995 along with UCLA nurse Lisa Knight, RN.

As a pediatric cardiologist at UCLA Children's Heart Center, Dr. Shannon specializes in electrophysiology, the diagnosis and treatment of conditions relating to the heart's electrical system. His young patients come to him with abnormal heart rhythms, which can take the form of lightheadedness, weakness, heart palpitations or fainting.

Decoding the heart's electrical system appeals to Dr. Shannon's interest in engineering, the field he expected to enter as a physics major at Haverford College in Pennsylvania. He changed paths after

realizing he disliked working alone. In medical school at Columbia University, he knew he wanted to work with children and became intrigued during his cardiology rotation.

"I understood physics and hemodynamics and electricity," he says. "It was fun to figure out what was wrong with a particular heart and why it was acting a particular way."

Camp del Corazón came as a result of Dr. Shannon's experience with a 10-year-old patient who had successfully undergone valve-replacement surgery at his recommendation. While doing a follow-up exam on the boy nine months after the procedure, Dr. Shannon noticed how his patient carefully avoided revealing his scar.

"I was watching him go through these contortions with his shirt, and the euphoria (of curing his heart condition) went out the window," he says. "I realized that what I'd done, in his mind, was traded a problem no one could see to a problem everyone could see."

Dr. Shannon thought the boy would benefit from interacting in a camp setting with other children who also had scars resulting from heart procedures. In 1995, only two such summer camps existed in the country, and the boy's mother balked at sending her son out of state. So Dr. Shannon and Lisa Knight, at that time his electrophysiology nurse, decided to start a camp in Southern California. They set the wheels in motion that April and welcomed 49 cardiac campers in September.

Today, Camp del Corazón runs three sessions and brings about 350 campers, ranging from ages 7 to 17, to Catalina Island for five days and four nights of adventure, activity and silliness. Children with such medical conditions as heart transplantation and heart failure might not otherwise have such opportunities, either because other camps are not equipped to deal with their medical needs or their parents don't feel comfortable sending them. Accredited by the American Camp Association and funded entirely by donations, Camp del Corazón is free to participants and is staffed by volunteer counselors, nurses and physicians — about 230 of them this past summer.

“This place holds a magical place in your heart,” says Colby Rycus, 23, who at age 7 underwent open-heart surgery to repair a defect in the veins leading from her lungs to her heart. Now a counselor for her fourth summer, Rycus — aka Kool Bee — attended as a camper for 11 years. “My best friends are from this camp. You have an underlying connection even if it’s not visible to the naked eye and even if your (heart) conditions are different.”

Dr. Shannon understood the value of camp after being a counselor at a day camp while a student in high school and at a sleep-away camp the summer between graduating college and starting medical school. Even so, he finds that campers aren’t the only ones who benefit.

“Doing this gives me a completely different understanding of what these children live with,” he says. He encourages UCLA fellows to do their pediatric cardiology rotation at Camp del Corazón so they will gain this valuable perspective.

His volunteer activities extend beyond camp. Over the years, Dr. Shannon has traveled on 10 medical missions to South America to provide medical care to children with congenital heart disease. In April, he spent a week in El Salvador and performed 23 cardiac ablations, a procedure to neutralize heart tissue responsible for aberrant electrical impulses that cause abnormal heartbeats.

Although Dr. Shannon doesn’t consider himself an athlete, he is certified as a lifeguard, a lifeguard instructor and an archery instructor. He also works with athletes, screening not only his pediatric patients who play sports, but also UCLA athletes and members of the NBA’s Los Angeles Lakers for heart abnormalities. Based on his findings, he will either clear them to play or deliver the devastating verdict that they can no longer participate in competitive sports.

For all of his patients, however, Dr. Shannon focuses on what they can do instead of what they can’t. “Our goal is to balance the treatment and the disease to make life as normal as possible and as long as possible,” he says. “But normal supersedes long. Because there’s no point living forever if you’re miserable.”

Back at Camp del Corazón, Big Kahuna has just returned from the kayak excursion. “Great job paddling,” he tells his boat mate, 11-year-old Sofia Manalang. “We make a great team.”

The smile on Sofia’s face tells him all he needs to know.

Nancy Sokoler Steiner is a freelance writer in Los Angeles.



Top: Dr. Kevin Shannon sits with camp counselor Daria Stancikas (left) and camper Julia Young, 11, during lunch at Camp del Corazón. **Bottom:** Dr. Shannon and Sofia Manalang, 11, prepare to kayak off Catalina Island.

Photos: Ann Johansson

Awards & Honors

Dr. Navid Amini, research faculty member at the UCLA Stein Eye Institute, was a 2016 Vodafone Wireless Innovation Project winner for work to solve critical issues facing the world today and driving social impact through mobile innovation.

Dr. Dean Bok (PhD '68), Dolly Green Professor of Ophthalmology, professor of neurobiology and a member of the UCLA Brain Research Institute, received the 2016 Helen Keller Prize for Vision Research from the Helen Keller Foundation for Research and Education.

Dr. Jeffrey Demanes (MD '74, RES '79), professor of brachytherapy in the Department of Radiation Oncology, received the Ulrich Henschke Award, the highest

honor from the American Brachytherapy Society.

Dr. Michael Ong, associate professor-in-residence of medicine and health-services research, was reappointed by California Gov. Jerry Brown to the Tobacco Education and Research Oversight Committee.

Dr. Antoni Ribas (FEL '98, '01), professor of hematology and oncology and director of the Parker Institute for Cancer Immunotherapy Center at UCLA, received the Richard and Hinda Rosenthal Memorial Award from the American Association for Cancer Research.

Dr. Jonathan Tobis, clinical professor of medicine in the Division of Cardiology and director of interventional

cardiology research, has been named to the new class of Master Fellows of the Society for Cardiovascular Angiography and Interventions.

Dr. Owen Witte, founding director of UCLA’s Eli and Edythe Broad Center of Regenerative Medicine and Stem Cell Research, was appointed University Professor by the University of California Board of Regents.

In Memoriam

Dr. Sidney Roberts, the first professor appointed to the Department of Physiological Chemistry in the newly established UCLA School of Medicine in 1948, died July 20, 2016. He was 98 years old. He served as acting

chairman of the department to begin organizing the teaching program, planning the physical facilities and reviewing applicants for entrance to the medical school’s first class. Dr. Roberts also played an important role in the early development of the UCLA Brain Research Institute, was a Guggenheim Fellow and served on numerous National Institutes of Health and National Science Foundation advisory panels.

Dr. Richard Wain Young, professor emeritus of anatomy, died May 18, 2016, in Hollywood, California. He was 86 years old. He served four years in the U.S. Marine Corps and attended college on the G.I. Bill. Dr. Young earned his PhD from Columbia

University, did postdoctoral work in Italy and Sweden and received additional training at the Oak Ridge Institute of Nuclear Studies in Tennessee, and in France. He joined the faculty of the UCLA School of Medicine’s Department of Anatomy in 1960; he retired in 1991. During his tenure, he received numerous recognitions, including the Friedenwald Award in Ophthalmology in 1976, one of the highest honors given by the Association for Research in Vision and Ophthalmology; the UCLA Distinguished Teaching award; the Bowman Lecture of the Royal College of Ophthalmologists; and an honorary Doctor of Science from the University of Chicago.