Tom Gordon is sitting in his office’s plush leather sofa with Jon Kobashigawa, MD. Artfully framed black and white photographs of his wife and two daughters decorate the wall behind them.

Suddenly, Gordon gets up and pulls two employees into the room. He is now standing in the middle of his office, clearly energized, his hands sweeping through the air as he is about to make a point.

“I don’t want to make this sound like it’s rehearsed,” he tells his colleagues, “but what’s the most important thing about the people I hire?”

They relax. Everyone on his staff knows this one. “Their hearts,” they say in unison.

Gordon nods. “What are we?”

“A family.” They’re smiling broadly.

So is Dr. Kobashigawa. In early 2010, he and his renowned cardiology group, the California Heart Center, left UCLA to join Tom Gordon’s family at Cedars-Sinai.

Gordon is Cedars-Sinai Health System’s senior vice president overseeing the Medical Delivery Network and serves as chief executive officer of the Medical Care Foundation, a group of more than 115 physicians and allied health providers who have been delivering primary and multi-specialty care to thousands of patients for more than 25 years.

To this exceptional group, Dr. Kobashigawa brought a vibrant cardiology practice, thereby creating the nation’s largest heart transplant program. During 2010, the Cedars-Sinai Heart Institute completed 76 adult heart transplants, more than any other hospital in the nation.

Catalyst: Tell us about the first time you met each other.

Dr. Jon: I originally met with Drs. Shlomo Melmed [senior vice president for Academic Affairs and dean of the Medical Faculty] and Eduardo Marbán [director of the Heart Institute]. When they called me, I had no intention of coming to Cedars-Sinai. The first call is always one of curiosity, so I met with them. They told me about their vision, and it was incredible.

Then I met Tom Gordon. Tom is a towering figure, so when he comes into the room, it’s scary in a way, but at the same time, he’s like a teddy bear. He just hugged me and said, “I hope to earn your trust.” And the first thing everybody thinks is: “Is he for real? Is he really that nice?” He is. He’s genuine. He means what he says.

Tom: For me it was a chance to explain to Jon and his team that I knew they had a wonderful situation at UCLA, but that UCLA is a different model. Our model is intensely physician-friendly.

Catalyst: Did you have the same vision for how things would develop if the California Heart Center joined Cedars-Sinai?

JK: My team knew that we were going to be supported at Cedars-Sinai, and that we would be able to pursue our mission: to provide the best care possible to our patients and have the best outcomes. We also knew that education and research are paramount here.

TG: Cedars-Sinai was committed to expanding the Heart Institute. And it was clear to me that expanding the Institute with extraordinary researchers, clinicians, and human beings like Jon and his group would be an incredible opportunity.
Catalyst: **Cedars-Sinai is now the No. 1 adult heart transplant center in the United States. How did that come about?**

JK: When we moved over to Cedars-Sinai, we were flabbergasted to hear our nurses say, “We’re coming with you.” And our assistants also said: “We’re coming with you. We don’t want to break up the group.”

So our chemistry remained intact, and that extended to our patients as well. Ninety percent of our patients came with us.

And I have to give credit to the heart surgeons, Dr. Alfredo Trento and Dr. Robert Kass, for the great work they do. We didn’t miss a heartbeat in terms of outcomes.

Catalyst: **In addition to transplant patients, you have a dynamic advanced heart disease program...**

JK: Advanced heart disease is an area in which we are making meaningful progress. Our Cardiac Mechanical Assist Device Program is thriving. We’ll be the first on the West Coast to launch the totally artificial heart. Also, we’ve developed our advanced heart failure program—we have a whole wing dedicated to the treatment of heart failure and transplant patients.

Catalyst: **Looking back, how did you first become interested in medicine?**

JK: For me, it was because of my family. Both my parents were educators. My mother was a home economics teacher in adult education and my father was an English teacher, both in the Los Angeles Unified School District. My uncle was a physician. And he was very engaged in community work. In fact, they called him “the mayor of Pearl City, Hawaii,” where he lived and worked.

Catalyst: **Tom, you ran a variety of businesses before you came to Cedars-Sinai, right?**

TG: Yes. When I finished college, my brother advised me to go into management. His observation was that wherever he had been, there was a shortage of good managers. So I was very lucky. My first job out of college was with an industrial uniform manufacturer, where I met my mentor, who took care of me, who guided me, who told me when I was going in the wrong direction, and changed my life. One of the most important things he taught me was not to be afraid to make a decision. Wherever I went after that, thanks to his guidance, I wasn’t afraid.

“I learned a long time ago that if you hire people with heart, you can do anything.”

TOM GORDON
The Philanthropic Spark

Catalyst: How do you view your role as a manager here at Cedars-Sinai?

TG: I try to offer hopes and dreams to physicians. These amazing men and women who are at the top of their field are also expected to be quasi-businesspeople. That’s not what they signed up for. That’s not what they’re interested in. They want to take care of patients.

The goal of the Cedars-Sinai Medical Care Foundation is to allow physicians to be physicians. We will do everything else that needs to be done for them. But the main thing that’s different about our Foundation is the culture. Most foundation models talk about being physician management practices. I want everyone who works here to feel that we are a physician support team.

JK: It’s true. Tom runs it as a partnership. Tom, you really and truly have earned not only my trust but also the trust of my entire group.

TG: I learned a long time ago that if you hire people with heart, you can do anything. These guys, they not only give heart, they are heart. That’s what’s so beautiful.

Jon Kobashigawa, MD, has had his share of elite titles. Tom Gordon will hijack a conversation to remind you that his friend is a superstar of the International Society of Heart and Lung Transplantation. (As past president and past program chair, Dr. Kobashigawa has held two of the society’s most prestigious positions.)

But the cardiologist’s most treasured title might be the one with Tom Gordon’s name attached: the DSL/Thomas D. Gordon Chair in Heart Transplantation Medicine. The endowed chair is the manifestation of an enduring personal friendship.

Land developer Donald S. Levin (the chair’s “DSL”) stumbled into friendship with Gordon while working on a Cedars-Sinai building lease. Gordon “found him to be an interesting, thoughtful man” and soon the two were trading personal histories and spending time with each other’s families.

When Levin needed knee surgery, Gordon was intent on caring for him. “I went to visit him every day in the hospital. I think it meant a lot to both of us,” Gordon says.

At the end of a complicated medical journey, Levin insisted on thanking his friend. Gordon suggested a small donation to the Medical Center—a token. “Mr. Levin went across the street, spoke to the hospital, and said he wanted to endow a chair in my name,” recalls Gordon. “That’s a commitment of $2 million. I actually thought that they’d misunderstood him.”

Gordon was overwhelmed by the gesture, but felt the endowed chair should go to a doctor doing lifesaving work. Enter Jon Kobashigawa, MD, a newcomer to Cedars-Sinai, but already a luminary in cardiac care.

“This was the perfect synergy, and it was an honor for Mr. Levin and me to have Jon as our inaugural chair,” Gordon says.

He is visibly moved when talking about Levin’s unexpected generosity. “This is family and that meant the world to me,” he says. “It really did.”