Although Dr. Dwight Harken died more than 20 years ago, his legacy continues to bring happiness, hope and heartfelt mission to thousands of heart disease patients.

It was in January 1951 that Dr. Harken, a successful Massachusetts heart surgeon, asked four of his former open-heart surgery patients to attend a meeting at Harvard Medical School’s Peter Bent Brigham Hospital in Boston, Massachusetts. Dr. Harken was chief of thoracic surgery there from 1948 to 1970.

The four heart surgery patients that Dr. Harken gathered together included Doris Silliman—one of the first 50 patients to ever have heart surgery—Keith Otto, Alford Santimassino and Elizabeth Wilkinson. As they talked together about their surgeries and their experiences after heart surgery, they realized that they all felt renewed and happy about life with their newly “mended hearts.” They also were surprised to discover that they wanted to spread the word to others who were going through or had gone through the same experiences.

Dr. Harken, who had developed a keen interest in the emotional side of his patients’ experiences, helped this small group carry out organizing a volunteer organization to help communicate the hope and happiness they felt. They called their support organization the Mended Hearts.

If Dr. Harken had done nothing more than help establish Mended Hearts, he would qualify as a Heart Hero. But consider these additional accomplishments.

- In World War II, Dr. Harken, working as a surgeon in London, successfully developed the ability to work directly on the hearts of wounded soldiers to remove shrapnel and bullets — something previously thought impossible.
- In 1951, Dr. Harken established the world’s first intensive care unit at Peter Bent Brigham Hospital (which later merged with several other Boston hospitals to become Brigham and Women’s Hospital). He had long felt that there was closer and more “intensive” care needed for patients during the critical hours after surgery. The concept was a breakthrough in the care of patients.
- Dr. Harken went on to pioneer many breakthroughs in the surgical procedures, technologies and patient care associated with heart disease.

For all of his brilliant and compassionate work, Dr. Harken remains a Heart Hero of the first order.

A Father’s Legacy
A heartfelt note by Dr. Alden Harken

During the Second World War my father, Dwight Harken, was stationed at a hospital in London where American soldiers with chest wounds were sent. Some had been shot in the heart. Historically, on rare occasions, patients with cardiac wounds had been treated surgically. But, mortality was high. Dwight Harken removed bullets and shrapnel from 133 soldiers’ hearts and every one survived. A Viennese surgeon had previously stated, “… Any surgeon who operates on the heart deserves to lose the respect of his colleagues.”

My father was called courageous. He responded by paraphrasing Winston Churchill: “It is the patients who have the lion’s heart; it has been my privilege to give the roar.” In subsequent decades, Dad cared for thousands of cardiac patients. His understanding and respect for patients with “mended hearts” grew and grew.

The members of Mended Hearts understand and appreciate the joy of being alive. Fortunately, that joy is infectious. My father and I believe that mended hearts make the world around them a better place.