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A healing
heart and
a changed
view of
hospital
care – Pg. 4



No Fear at Cape Fear Valley

A healing heart and a changed
view of hospital care

It was a sunny morning in late summer. Scot Jackson and his wife, Pamela, were enjoying some quiet time in their Fayetteville backyard, tending to the lawn before the day got too hot. Scot was pulling up mushrooms when suddenly he began to feel unwell.

:: by Lia Tremblay

"She went inside to get me some Alka Seltzer," he said. "When she came back out, I was in the lawn chair, sweating profusely with my eyes rolled back."

Alarmed, Pamela dialed 9-1-1 immediately. Jackson says the ambulance ride was a blur, but as someone who has worked in healthcare for years, he recalls hearing a word that got his attention.

"I knew when I heard them say 'STEMI' that it was a heart attack," he said.

STEMI stands for segment elevation myocardial infarction. The most severe type of heart attack, it involves the complete blockage of at least one major artery to the heart.



"They said if they'd gotten to me 30 minutes later, I would not be of this world," Jackson said.

Jackson was immediately brought to Cape Fear Valley's cardiac catheterization lab, where cardiologist Manoj Bhandari, M.D., FACC, FASE, placed two stents to reopen the blocked arteries that had caused his heart attack. One was the left anterior descending (LAD) artery, which Jackson said he's heard referred to as "the widow maker."

"I remember waking up," he said, "and the first thing I said was, 'Find my wife and tell her I'm OK.'"

After the stents were placed, Jackson had a two-night hospital stay to recover under close observation. It gave him lots of time to ponder his brush with death, made easier by the attentive care he received.

"I have never felt so cared for," he said. "Everyone I encountered was so compassionate and kind."

Having a positive hospital stay was a revelation for Jackson, whose life-changing experience with polio in his teens made him somewhat wary of doctors.

"My experiences as a young man tainted my willingness to embrace medical care," he said. "But Dr. Bhandari is one of the most gentle and loving souls I've ever met."

Jackson said every nurse involved in his care treated him like family, too, but it wasn't just the clinical staff who made his stay so memorable. He remembered the food service staff fondly, and recalled a moment when a woman who had come to clean the room gently placed a flower on his table.

"I asked what it was for," he said, "and she told me, 'It's for you, with the sweetest smile.'"

While a heart attack is not something he would have wished for – "especially in a pandemic," he said – Jackson said the experience has given him a focus on gratitude he never had before. After he was discharged, his wife knitted lap blankets for all the nurses who had cared for him, and Jackson himself penned a heartfelt letter to hospital leadership.

"I felt the need to give back and give thanks," he said. "This experience has given me a new meaning of love and life."

He's eager to tell the story to others, especially anyone who might share his initial unease about medical care.

"I'm a walking ad for this hospital," he said. "I always say, 'There's no fear at Cape Fear Valley.'"

Months after his ordeal, Jackson is keeping a close eye on his health. His checkups with Dr. Bhandari are going well, showing minimal damage and steady healing from the heart attack.

"I have learned from this not to take health for granted," he said. "Without it, what is there? It should be health, family and work, in that order."

Moving into this new year, Jackson said he has new meaning for a phrase he has often used.

"When people ask how I'm doing, I've always said, 'It's another day in paradise, living the dream,' and now I really mean it."