

Get Well. Be Well. Stay Well.



WHEN GREG AND STACEY RENKER SURVIVED NEARLY FATAL ILLNESSES, IT CHANGED THEIR PERSPECTIVES ON LIFE. THEY FEEL BLESSED AND GRATEFUL FOR THEIR EXCELLENT DOCTORS AT EISENHOWER MEDICAL CENTER.

In their early 40s, dynamic, active and healthy, Greg and Stacey Renker never dreamed that disaster would strike them both when they were so young. But unexpected illnesses gave them an unexpected gift — the gift of gratitude. “If it wasn’t for the world-class expertise and dedication of the doctors and staff at Eisenhower Medical Center, neither one of us would be here today,” shares Greg Renker. “We consider Eisenhower a part of our extended family. They took care of us and saved our lives, and that’s why we’ve made a lifelong commitment to do the same for the Eisenhower Medical Center.”

Greg, a founding principal of the Guthy-Renker® Corporation, the world’s largest direct response television company, always took care of his health. He had regular check ups and health screenings, ate well, controlled his cholesterol, and exercised daily. In fact, Greg and his wife Stacey had it all — a happy marriage, three beautiful children, a successful business, and an active lifestyle. However, in 1998, at the age of 41, Greg began experiencing shortness of breath while exercising. He mentioned it to close friend Michael Landes, Eisenhower Medical Center Foundation President, who insisted that he contact Ron Sneider, MD, Board Certified Pulmonologist at Eisenhower, for an immediate consultation. Dr. Sneider recommended that Greg schedule a treadmill stress test for the very next day with Barry Hackshaw, MD, an Eisenhower Board Certified Cardiologist.

Less than ten minutes into the test, Dr. Hackshaw recognized irregular rhythms and other cardiac changes that suggested an inadequate blood supply to the heart. While the electrocardiogram (EKG) confirmed that Greg had not had a heart attack, it did indicate that he was at very high risk.

Further test results revealed one coronary artery was completely blocked and two more were nearly blocked. “I thought Stacey and I would be flying to Las Vegas that evening, and all of a sudden, not just my schedule but my entire life was put on hold,” recalls Greg. “Heart disease is not part of my family history, so I was shocked when Dr. Hackshaw told me that I could have a heart attack at any moment.”

Greg agreed to an emergency angioplasty and stent procedure to quickly restore the blood flow to his heart. During this sensitive surgery, the first two arteries were successfully opened when an uncommon complication arose. The catheter that guides the position of the stent perforated Greg’s blocked right coronary artery. The membrane that surrounds the heart, or pericardium, began filling with blood, causing Greg’s heart to come to a complete stop.

A “Code Blue” was called, his blood pressure dropped to zero, and cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) was started immediately. Dr. Hackshaw worked swiftly to save Greg’s life. Stacey Renker heard the “Code Blue” alarm from the waiting room, and she was immediately informed that the code had been called for Greg.

Joseph Wilson, MD, a Board Certified Cardiothoracic Surgeon, responded to the Code Blue and performed emergency open-heart surgery, quickly stitching the perforation closed and performing beating heart coronary bypass surgery on the blocked artery (see Feature, “Coronary Artery Bypass Graft Surgery”). The quick action from both doctors saved Greg’s life. “I felt helpless in that moment,” says Stacey, “which is why I’ll always be grateful for the surgeons who not only detected the blockage but saved his life. Thoughts raced through my mind...we were so young, but there I was, so close to losing him!”

Fortunately, Greg made a full and complete recovery. As a direct result of this life-changing experience, Greg and Stacey made a decision to found the Renker Wellness Center for the treatment of cardiac and pulmonary patients. Opening on March 3, 2004, the Renker Wellness Center offers state-of-the-art cardiac and pulmonary rehabilitation programs, in concert with a high-tech exercise facility with the best aerobic and cardiac monitoring equipment available.

“Several weeks before my bypass surgery,” Greg reflects, “I was sitting in a conference room at Guthy-Renker headquarters. I experienced a fleeting moment where I sensed that something wasn’t quite right, but I couldn’t pinpoint it...other than a vague sense of discord.... Other than that, I had no indication that I was so close to having a major heart attack,” explains Greg. “Had it not been for the miraculous sequence of events — and the fast thinking of Drs. Sneider, Hackshaw and Wilson, I wouldn’t be here today.”

“Greg’s taken charge of his life. He eats right, exercises, and practices effective stress management techniques,” says Dr. Hackshaw. “Through diet, exercise, and medication, his prognosis is great. Since we were able to prevent a heart attack, Greg’s heart muscle suffered no damage. Greg’s an excellent example of how well a post-bypass patient can do — no one could ask for a better outcome!”

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It was a short five years later that the Renkers would experience another lifethreatening health crisis. This time, however, it was Stacey Renker whose life was in jeopardy.

In February 2003, Stacey was preparing for her son Ryan’s 11th birthday party. She had been fighting a cold, and suddenly, she began feeling worse. For several days, Stacey had endured a fever, sore throat and cough. All at once, she became exhausted and had difficulty breathing. Stacey called her sister, a nurse, who insisted that Stacey go to the Emergency Department at Eisenhower Medical Center where Ken Jesser, MD, Board Certified in Emergency Medicine, admitted Stacey immediately. Her sickness escalated rapidly, and she began coughing up blood. “I learned through Greg’s health event that when you have a life-threatening illness, nothing else really matters,” says Stacey.

By the next morning, Stacey had been moved to the Intensive Care Unit and was experiencing multiple organ failure, but the root cause of her illness was still a mystery. Richard Stone, MD, ordered hemodialysis to help remove the toxins from her system. Concurrently, Lawrence A. Cone, MD, a Board Certified specialist in Infectious Disease, acting on a “hunch,” administered gamma globulin (antibodies that boost the immune system), Xigris®, which is a synthetic activated Protein C (an enzyme that is an anticoagulant, as well as an anti-inflammatory), and an antibiotic. “Even though the results of Stacey’s blood work were not yet back from the lab, there was no time to waste,” recalls Dr. Cone. “I had discovered the first two cases of a Group A Streptococcus pyogenes Toxic Shock at Eisenhower Medical Center, back in 1987, which were published in The New England Journal of Medicine, and had a hunch that this was the infection that we were dealing with,” Cone explains. “If I was right, we had less than 24 hours to successfully treat it...or Stacey’s chances of survival were slim.”

Severe invasive Group A Streptococcus pyogenes infections associated with shock and organ failure have been termed “streptococcal toxic shock syndrome” (TSS). People of all ages can be affected, and most do not have an underlying predisposing disease. Despite aggressive treatment, 30 to 70 percent of patients with TSS do not survive.

Fortunately, Dr. Cone’s hunch was exactly right. The lab tests confirmed that Stacey indeed had a Streptococcus pyogenes infection in her bloodstream. Her body was utilizing the anticoagulant activated Protein C faster than it could manufacture more, causing her blood to clot, and thus, causing the multiple organ failure.

Dr. Cone immediately began an aggressive treatment protocol to kill the bacteria. Within the next 24 hours, Stacey’s condition improved dramatically. She spent another 10 days in the hospital before returning home. “I could not believe that my life had been on the line. The care that we received from the doctors and staff at Eisenhower Medical

Center was second to none," says Stacey. "It was clear, from the very moment we arrived at the hospital, that the doctors and the nursing staff were completely focused on my condition. That gave me hope and confidence when I needed it most."

"Stacey has recovered fully and has had no lasting effects from her condition," says Dr. Cone. "In fact, Stacey Renker's case was so unique, and she responded so well to the activated Protein C treatment, that I wrote an article along with Stacey which was published recently in the Scandinavian Journal of Infectious Diseases."

"To say the least, we've become very familiar with the staff at Eisenhower Medical Center over the years," shares Stacey. "At one point, we even had three family members in the hospital at the same time!"

The Renkers are filled with gratitude and optimism. "This entire experience was a blessing for us. We no longer take life for granted," explains Stacey. "We now try to live life to its fullest — whether it's through our commitment to the Eisenhower Medical Center, or our appreciation of our family, friends, art, music, and travel."

Greg and Stacey's advice is to "Be aware of intuitive messages, and act on them. Don't wait — go to the doctor to have it checked out," shares Greg Renker. "...And when you're given a second chance, make sure those around you know how much you appreciate them!"