

Renee DeSalvo

Woman placed in hospice gets second chance at Barrow

by Catherine Menor

The news was bad—especially coming just days before Christmas 2006. Renee DeSalvo was not expected to live more than 24 hours.

Cindy and Steve Crandall, DeSalvo's sister and brother-in-law, were in shock. DeSalvo had seemed perfectly healthy until that Wednesday when she'd suffered a severe pain in her right eye and passed out at work. Doctors at the hospital where she was taken told the family that an arteriovenous malformation—an abnormal tangle of blood vessels on the left side of her brain—had ruptured, causing a massive hemorrhage and leaving the 53-year-old woman paralyzed and blind on her right side.

"They said that if they operated, she'd probably be a vegetable and need a feeding tube," recalls Steve.

The doctors recommended hospice, and, knowing DeSalvo's independent streak, the family reluctantly agreed. DeSalvo received last rites and was transferred to a nearby hospice. It was Wednesday evening.

Second thoughts

As DeSalvo lay in her hospice bed, still unconscious, her family gathered to say their goodbyes. DeSalvo's long-time friends "The Crazy Eights" caught a red-eye from Chicago to be with her one last time.

But late that night, DeSalvo suddenly reached over to one of her two grown sons, and said, "Why are you crying?"

The next day, she was moving her affected right side some, and she seemed to recognize people. That's when Steve decided the family needed a second opinion. Steve, who was well acquainted with Barrow, drove DeSalvo's scans to St. Joseph's late Thursday night in hopes that he could get Dr. Robert Spetzler, director of Barrow, to take a look at them.

"I said a little prayer, wrote a letter, taped it on the outside of the films, and told a lady in the ER that Dr. Spetzler was going to operate on Renee tomorrow and needed films on his desk first thing in the morning," says Steve.

Early the next morning, Steve called Barrow and reached a doctor. Ten minutes later, he had an answer—Dr. Spetzler would do the operation that day.

Things happened rapidly after that. DeSalvo arrived at Barrow by ambulance, and the Barrow team quickly obtained new CT scans. Then, Dr. Spetzler met with

the family to map out his treatment plan, and the family agreed to surgery.

A team of neurosurgeons, led by Dr. Spetzler, removed the blood clot and the AVM from DeSalvo's left temporal lobe. At 6:30 Friday evening, the family received the news they'd been praying for—the surgery had been successful.

"There are no words to explain how this feels," says Cindy. "It's that big of a miracle."

Long road back

DeSalvo spent a rocky week in ICU, a few days in a regular patient room, and nearly three weeks in the Deborah and Bruce Downey Neuro Rehabilitation Center. There, she learned how to sit in a chair, walk with a walker and feed herself. She also worked on improving her memory and ability to communicate. DeSalvo left the hospital in late January and continued outpatient rehabilitation until December 2007.

Today, DeSalvo, who has no memory of her hospital stay, lives independently. She reads and does puzzles daily to improve her cognitive skills, attends Brain Tumor Support Group meetings at Barrow, and volunteers at a school and hospital near her home.

Although she still has language and thinking deficits and peripheral vision loss, DeSalvo is grateful for the second chance she's been given. And her attitude is much better now than it was before her ordeal, she says. "Life is so beautiful. Every day is a good day."

DeSalvo hopes someday to work as a volunteer at Barrow, helping other patients achieve a more positive outlook after surgery.

In February, DeSalvo flew back to Chicago for a 40th school reunion. She couldn't wait to see all her old friends. ■

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Every day is a good day."

Renee DeSalvo



Renee DeSalvo is enjoying life again after a frightening encounter with an arteriovenous malformation.