

## then and now

Fourteen years ago, Barrow commuted  
Las Vegas man's death sentence

by Catherine Menor



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**R**obert Frazier was deteriorating daily because of a giant basilar artery aneurysm in his brain. The aneurysm was pressing against his brain stem and causing both physical and cognitive problems—a drooping eye, slurred speech, paralysis on his left side, confused thinking and terrifying nightmares.

Doctors in Las Vegas—even after consulting several West Coast neurosurgeons—offered no hope. One advised Robert to “get your affairs in order.”

**R**obert and his wife, Donna, have celebrated 14 Christmases and anniversaries since then. Robert has worked as a parking valet, as he did before his health scare, for 13 of those years. “Everything’s great,” says the 58-year-old man of his current health.

Donna Frazier was not ready to give up on her husband of 20 years when, in 1993, doctors told them Bob's aneurysm was inoperable. Instead the couple drove to a nearby library, where they found a book on "America's best doctors."

Inside, the Fraziers found listings for several neurosurgeons who fit their criteria—doctors with excellent credentials and within driving distance of Las Vegas—but the couple kept going back to one particular name: Robert Spetzler, MD.

Bob and Donna were impressed with their first call to Barrow. "We were in a boat without an oar," says Donna. "When I called his office, they were so wonderful that I knew we'd made the right choice."

### 'An unbelievable, super call'

The Fraziers sent Bob's X-rays to Dr. Spetzler. Then one afternoon, when Bob was feeling panicked about the aneurysm, the phone rang. It was Dr. Spetzler.

"That call was so relaxing," Bob says. "He had such a soothing voice. It was as if he said, 'Just relax. Everything's going to be okay. You're coming to a good hospital.' It was just an unbelievable, super call."

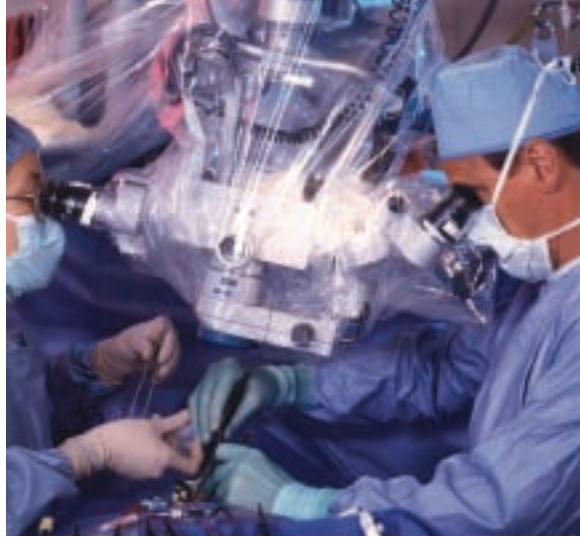
Dr. Spetzler explained that the operation, though difficult and complex, was doable. It would require a team of surgeons and multiple operations to eliminate the balloon-shaped, blood-filled aneurysm. There were huge risks, but the outcome without treatment was certain death as the aneurysm continued growing and pressing against vital brain structures—or ruptured, causing a massive stroke.

The Fraziers' insurance company was not convinced that Bob could be helped. After initially rejecting the surgery, the company agreed to hear the case at their review board. Donna appeared before the board, which she describes as "seven men in suits."

"I wore my power suit," she says. "I had the confidence that there was someone out there who could help Bob and that was where we needed to go. I guess I did one heck of a sales job because they agreed to it."

Bob and Donna arrived at Barrow in September 1993. They would not go home again until December.

Bob underwent a series of four surgeries:



Barrow neurosurgeons performed a series of operations to remove a huge aneurysm in Robert Frazier's brain. Barrow Neurological Foundation supports aneurysm research at Barrow.

- On Oct. 8, Dr. Spetzler and his team used a piece of vein to build a bypass around the aneurysm. By giving the blood in the basal artery a way around the aneurysm, the surgeons reduced blood flow into and pressure inside of the aneurysm.

- Three days later, Phil Daspit, MD, created more room in which to operate on the aneurysm by drilling through the mastoid bone behind Bob's ear. After this surgery, neuroradiologists examined the aneurysm more closely through cerebral angiography. They found no evidence of bleeding from the aneurysm. In

fact, the bypass had reduced blood flow enough that some clotting had occurred in the aneurysm, decreasing the risk of hemorrhage during the final operation.

- On Oct. 15, Dr. Spetzler and his team implanted a shunt in Bob's brain to drain excess fluid.
- In the final surgery on Nov. 12, the neurosurgery team debulked the aneurysm—that is, they removed as much of the lesion as possible.

Bob spent many weeks in the Neuro Rehab Unit, both between procedures and after the final operation. He participated in physical and speech therapy.

"I fought all the way," says Bob of the effort he put into rehab. "I thought to myself, 'I'll drive a car again. I'll be back in no time.'"

His therapists were not so optimistic. Bob might never drive a car again, let alone go back to his job parking cars in Las Vegas.

### A remarkable recovery

But Bob was determined. Back in Las Vegas, he began walking daily—using a cane at first and walking short distances. Gradually, he worked up to five-mile walks and, just a year after his surgery, he returned to his old job. Now, at age 58, Bob is still parking cars. His only deficit is a slight weakness in his left arm.

Bob has not forgotten what Barrow did for him. "Every year I send Dr. Spetzler a birthday card and a Christmas card, thanking him, telling him everything is good, and thanking him." ■