



The Quiet One... Who's Always There

by Jon Caswell

“After going into cardiac arrest, I was aware that I had died. Everything turned to a very brilliant shade of yellow. I seemed to be waiting for the next thing to happen when I heard the paddles go off.”

— Robert Borum

Thanks to modern medicine, Robert and I have had seven years that we weren't supposed to have,” says Sue Borum of her husband. They live in Charleston, S.C., where they are members of Chapter 266. Sue is the Regional Director of the Mid-Atlantic Region and widely known within Mended Hearts as the Chairperson of the 2005 convention in Charleston.

According to Sue, when Robert went into the heart attack business at age 69, he did it in a big way. “He didn't have something simple, like a stent,” she says. “Oh no, he died and had to be resuscitated before they performed a CABG5X. That was in September 1999, a few years after he'd retired from a career in the federal government.”

“I was getting the luggage out of the car after returning home from our daughter's, where we had gone to flee Hurricane Floyd,” he recalls. “I had had chest pains several times previously, but I had ignored them. One had been accompanied by shortness of breath, but I didn't attribute any of them to my heart.” But the pain while unloading the luggage concerned him enough that he went to the ER. An EKG showed nothing, and he was sent home with nitroglycerin tablets.

That night the pain came back, and the nitroglycerin didn't help. At the ER they used a clot-buster, but when they sat him up to take an X-ray, Robert went into cardiac arrest.

“After going into cardiac arrest, I was aware that I had died. Everything turned to a very brilliant shade of yellow,” says Robert. “I seemed to be waiting for the next thing to happen when I heard the paddles go off. I didn't feel them, but I could hear them. At that moment everything turned to the blackest black that you can imagine, then all of a sudden it was like I was looking through a cloud, and my vision slowly returned as the cloud cleared. Images were coming back, and suddenly I was aware that all of this was happening with my eyes open. This was the eeriest experience I have ever had; however, I never experienced fear. When everything came into view

“Visiting for Mended Hearts is very rewarding. You can’t beat the feeling of knowing that you’ve helped someone when they were scared.”

again, the doctor was staring at me with an expression of great concern. I said, ‘I went away, didn’t I?’ and he nodded his head yes.”

A heart catheterization a few days later showed four blockages, and his bypass surgery was scheduled for the next day. During the four-hour operation, the surgeon found a fifth blockage, which was repaired with a vein instead of an artery. “Before the surgery my only real feeling of fear was in the surgical holding area,” says Robert. “I realized I might never see my grandchildren again. I didn’t come out of it till the next morning, and as soon as I was aware of my surroundings, I thought, ‘I made it!’” There were six grandchildren who were happy about that.

From the hospital he went to cardiac rehab and was soon feeling better, but then one of the grafts closed, and he had another heart attack. That required another ambulance trip to the ER, another catheterization, this time with angioplasty and a stent. A week later he was back in rehab.

Less than two months later, in January 2000, he and Sue traveled to Tennessee for a grandson’s birthday. “All the grandchildren were there, and it snowed on Saturday, and we slid down hills all day. We had a great time,” says Robert. But his heart wasn’t ready to get out of the heart attack business quite yet. Early Sunday morning the chest constriction returned. “We called 9-1-1, but we were 35 miles from the hospital, and the ambulance was directed to the wrong subdivision, plus there was still snow on the ground, so it took awhile to get to the hospital. It was a harrowing trip.”

That visit resulted in yet another catheterization, angioplasty and stent on the same artery as before. Three days later he was released, but he couldn’t drive so Sue drove through the snowy mountains back to Charleston. “I figured if that didn’t give me a heart attack, I was in great shape,” says Robert.

He returned to the hospital rehab program for another eight weeks of work, then joined the hospital’s heart fitness center. “Things were going fine, but then I had to have some non-heart-related surgery in July and had to stop exercising. After the surgery, they had to re-evaluate my condition before I could start exercising again, so they put me on a heart monitor. That’s when they found I had ventricular tachycardia and sent me to an electrophysiologist. He explained the symptoms and told me that if I had any of them to go to the ER immediately.”



Robert and Sue Borum

“Ventricular tachycardia is when there’s irregularity in the left ventricle. It’s called the ‘sudden death syndrome,’” says Sue.

Within a few days Robert had a cold sweat, a symptom he’d been having for several years but didn’t realize was related to a heart problem. In addition to having an electrophysiology study, he also had another catheterization, which showed that the graft that had already caused two heart attacks was completely closed. “A few minutes into the electrophysiology study, I went into cardiac arrest again, and it took several jolts to resuscitate me. They stopped the study and decided that an implantable pacemaker/defibrillator was the best way to protect me, so they put in the device that afternoon.”

Since then, Robert has gotten out of the heart attack business, but he has not gotten out of the heart business altogether. In February 2001, he and Sue joined Mended Hearts Chapter 266. Soon they were accredited visitors and began to use the practical experience they had gained as a survivor and a caregiver.

“After he had survived so many heart events,” says Sue, “we felt we wanted to help others know that they could also survive.”

Since then they have talked to many heart patients. “You find that the younger they are, the more scared they are,” she says. “They didn’t expect that kind of disruption in their life. We visit once a month, as a



The Borums celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary.

couple. I talk to the family, and he talks to the patient because he's been there."

The Borums' involvement in Mended Hearts has deepened in the five years since they joined. Sue was elected president of the Charleston chapter and was chairman of the convention committee when Chapter 266 hosted the 2005 Annual

Convention. At that convention, she was elected Regional Director for the Mid-Atlantic Region.

"When I was president, I called Robert my co-president because he did whatever was needed," says Sue. "We had a lot of stuff to move to the convention center, and he did all that and much more. And he's that way with me as RD. He does everything he's asked and never complains. He hasn't taken any offices because he doesn't need the stress of the responsibility. He also didn't take them because he's the quiet one, but he's always there.

"He's died twice, and yet he's gone on to do anything he wants to do. Of course, he does what the doctor tells

him to do, but that's why he can do anything he wants. In addition to the heart procedures, he's had five prostate procedures and a spinal fusion — 13 invasive procedures in all. For awhile there it seemed like every two months it was something else, but he went on like it was nothing. He never gave in to any of it, never complained, never felt sorry for himself. He did what he had to do and moved forward."

Today, Robert exercises three times a week and plays golf twice a week. On Wednesdays he works as an ambassador at the golf course, making sure things run smoothly.

"Visiting for Mended Hearts is very rewarding," says Robert. "You can't beat the feeling of knowing that you've helped someone when they were scared. For a patient, not knowing what they're facing is the scariest part. When they talk to someone who's been through it, they begin to understand that they can get through it, too. Plus, you meet so many nice people."

There really is life after heart trouble. ❤️



"He's died twice, and yet he's gone on to do anything he wants to do."

New Weapons in the Education Arsenal

Mended Hearts has recently developed three new education items to be included in its inventory of materials to share with heart patients.

"Understanding Your Heart" is a 24-page booklet developed in response to Mended Hearts visitors' requests for a variety of topics in one easy-to-reference resource. Topics

range from the basics – such as What is Heart Disease? What is Heart Failure? – to an overview of common procedures such as angioplasty, bypass and valve surgery. The booklet's pertinent topics include risk factors and how to control them, pacemakers and the benefits of cardiac rehabilitation. A seven-

page companion brochure, "Taking Your Medication Safely and Effectively," includes information on why medical compliance is important and tips for understanding your medications. It also contains a chart to help track daily medicine intake. Both of these items are made possible by contributions from Merck/Schering-Plough.

A third brochure, "A Heartfelt Guide to Life After a Heart Attack," provides an in-depth overview of what a heart attack is, risk factors, prevention, treatment and even includes questions to ask your doctor. This brochure is made possible by contributions from GlaxoSmithKline.

All three brochures are currently available. Chapter presidents or visiting chairmen can order copies by calling the National Office, 1-888-HEART99 (1-888-432-7899).

