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When the President Came to Youngstown

by Jon Caswell

What would you do if the White House called? At that moment, it probably wouldn't matter whether you were a Democrat or a Republican — most of us would drop whatever we were doing and grab the phone. By that standard, Sid Harris isn't most people.

A member of Mended Hearts since 1989, Sid, 77, had a quadruple bypass 15 years ago. He is a founding member and past president of Chapter 7 in Youngstown, Ohio.

"I was working in the yard on Friday afternoon," recalls Sid, "and my wife Doris came out and told me Eric was on the phone. 'Tell him to call me back,' I said. She said, 'He says he's from the White House.' There's a farmers market here called White House Farms, and I thought it was them calling so I said to get a number. That's when she let me know it wasn't the Farms, and I went in and took the call." The White House was calling to tell Sid that he'd been nominated as an outstanding volunteer by Forum Health Medical Center.

The White House called back that night with the news that Sid had been selected and that they would get back in touch. "They called again Monday night and said to drive to the Youngstown Air Reserve Station the next morning and meet a bunch of people, so we did that. I assumed that all of them were being recognized, too, but out of the whole group, I was the only one being honored. When Air Force One landed, President Bush exited and came over and talked to us and the White House photographer took pictures. This was right when he had fallen while riding his bike, so I told him, 'Mr. President, do me a favor — be careful when you ride your bike!'"

The President invited Sid and Doris to ride in the motorcade from the airbase to Youngstown State University, where the President was making a speech on expanding access to health care. The President explained that he would speak for a few minutes and then he was going to introduce Sid. "He told Doris, 'When I call on him, if he doesn't hear me, I want you to poke him in the ribs,'" says Sid.

"I told him that I knew by that remark that he was married," says Doris.

The President's visit to Youngstown State was billed as a dialog about health care. Sid, Doris and the other guests had reserved seats, and shortly after he started his speech, the President asked Sid to stand — Doris didn't have to poke him — and

President Bush acknowledged Sid as "a soldier in the army of compassion."

"It seemed like he spoke for five minutes," says Sid, "and then people stood and applauded. And that's the first time it hit me that the most powerful man in the world is honoring a small guy like me."

Of course, when the most powerful man in the world honors a small guy, that small guy gets a lot of attention for a few days. In addition to having their picture with the President in the Youngstown *Vindicator*, Sid and Doris got up at six the next morning for a live interview on the local television station. "They wanted to know about meeting the President," says Sid, "but I also made them set up an appointment to do a story about Mended Hearts."

The day after that he was interviewed by *Health Magazine*. "They asked me how my health was," says Sid, "and I told them other than being legally blind, a diabetic and heart patient, I'm fine."

Not only did the President's spotlight illuminate him for other media, it caused another president to give him a call. Mended Hearts President Fulton Johnson heard about Sid's honor and called him at home the next week.

"I was pleased to learn that a Mended Hearts accredited visitor was honored for outstanding volunteerism," says President Johnson. "I congratulated Sid on receiving this honor from the President of the United States for years of dedicated services to others. Sid has exemplified Mended Hearts' mission by providing hope to many heart patients and their families since becoming an accredited visitor of Youngstown, Ohio, Chapter 7."

"I told Fulton 'I am just as happy having you call me as the President.'"

Sid has had to curtail his activities in recent years because of loss of vision due to macular degeneration. He also discovered that he has dia-

betes after his blood sugar tested at 578. "It's under control now," he says. "Doris is in charge of my health."

"I really appreciate Mended Hearts, the whole system, the people — we have everything in common. I used to be a pretty regular visitor but I don't have a ride anymore. I've always enjoyed visiting and I miss it. We have people come in depressed and then they start feeling better. We're like a family, really."

Sid has not let blindness keep him from participating in life. In addition to Mended Hearts, "I'm active in a support group for blind people. We get together and play short-hole golf and really enjoy it. Every fall, I go to the T-Ball Tournament in Iowa City, Iowa. It's a golf tournament for blind people. We golf, bowl, have a banquet and they take us to different places. It teaches us to be independent. Last year I won a closest-to-the-hole award.

"I have another friend who is completely blind and I lead him around. I've always enjoyed helping people; that's just the way I am. Years ago I saw a sign that said, 'I used to feel sorry for myself because I had no shoes, until I met a man who had no feet.' That stuck in my mind all these years. Maybe that's why I've always liked helping people and encouraging them to stretch their limits." ❤️



Doris and Sid Harris in front of Air Force One



*A Davis: Sid
Ben with you 3/2*

What the President Said

When I landed at the airport, I met a fellow named Sid Harris. I'm about to introduce Sid. He has been an active volunteer at a local hospital for 15 years, where he's performed over 4,000 hours of volunteer help. Sid runs fundraisers so that children with heart problems can go to camp in Virginia. He sends nursing students to Youngstown State University. Sid is a soldier in the army of compassion.

The thing about Sid is that he is such a loving guy that he wants to help somebody in life. That's what he wants to do. We talk about the strength of the country being the military, and we're going to keep it strong so the world will be more peaceful and free. We talk about one of our strengths being the fact that we're a wealthy nation compared to other nations, and that's the way we want it, and we've got to make sure we remain the best place in the world to risk capital so people can work. But the true strength of our country is the fact that people like Sid are willing to take time out of their lives to make somebody else's life better.

We've got people in our country who hurt, who are lonely, who wonder whether the future belongs to them, whether there's any brighter day. And we've got people in our country who are willing to surround the lonely with love and to help. That's the strength of America. And the reason I like to talk about the Sid Harris of the world is to thank those here and those around Youngtown, and around the country, who are doing the same thing. And to call upon others to love your neighbor like you'd like to be loved yourself. We can all save America, one heart and one soul at a time. And Sid Harris is a part.

— Tuesday, May 25, 2004, Youngstown State University

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