



Following His Heart: Foregoing Keys to the 'Vette for Patient Charts

by Jon Caswell

When Randy Evans started nursing school on his 57th birthday, some of his friends labeled it a mid-life crisis. Randy laughs at the thought: "I can tell you that it would be a lot easier just to buy a sports car. This is a lot of work for a mid-life crisis." Randy is in his first year of nursing school at the Nell Hodgson Woodruff School of

Nursing of Emory University, after two years of taking required science courses at a community college near his home in Atlanta. Randy was awarded one of the Mary M. Amato Education Award scholarships at this year's convention.

Obviously nursing was not Randy's first career choice, but then neither did he choose to have a quadruple bypass at age 51. Randy's first career was as a journalist and writer. In fact, he and his wife, Maria Mackas, have had a successful business for many years writing speeches, employee benefits information and other material for corporate clients. Randy and Maria loved working together, even turning down business so they didn't have to grow beyond the carriage-house office behind their home. Randy was also a runner, averaging 40-45 miles a week. "When we adopted our daughter Marra in 1994, I stopped running for about a year. Then in preparation for running again, I planned to start walking. I went out and started at a walking pace and came to a hill and felt the tightness in my chest, so I went home and didn't do it again. I knew what I had felt."

Like many people, Randy didn't want to face what he suspected because of his family history with heart disease and stroke: His father had a quadruple bypass (and a stroke during the surgery) at

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Randy and Maria Evans



Randy and Maria with daughter Marra



Randy with his fellow nursing students

age 60, and three of his father's siblings died of heart disease. Both Randy's paternal grandparents died of strokes. "I was very educated about heart disease. I knew my risks, that's why I ran and ate right."

For the next few years, he had chest pains at night, and he became weaker and weaker. "I withdrew from things with my family and didn't do anything that took exertion. Of course, Maria knew something was wrong and tried to get me to go to a doctor and get tested, but I was stubborn. I was afraid of having a stroke."

Then one night in September 2000, the chest pains came and wouldn't go away. Randy remembers: "Maria and I sat in a dark house, and I told her I'd made up my mind to do something. She tried to comfort me and painted the best possible outcome, but I knew how it would be because I knew there was something wrong — I had gone from running 45 miles a week to being unable to mow my lawn without catching my breath after each pass with the lawnmower."

Randy didn't do well on the stress test. He had two arteries that were completely blocked and two that were 60-70 percent blocked. Within the week he had a quadruple bypass, a decade earlier than his father's.

"When you have a major health event, it changes your life. This one has certainly changed mine. In many ways it was the best thing that ever happened to me: Not only did the surgery save my life, but the whole experience changed the direction of my life from a nice comfortable work life to the decision to spend another four years in school to become a nurse."

His master's degree in journalism did not help him get into nursing school. Before he could even apply, he had to take 10 science courses and do well in them. He knew he wanted to enroll in Emory's nurse training, but it is a very competitive program, admitting only one in three applicants.

While his journalism degree might not be relevant to his nursing studies, his membership in Mended Hearts is

likely to be a plus in his nursing career. Randy's bypass surgery was a complete success and within months he was back to vigorous exercise, even running 6.2 miles in the Peachtree Classic road race in 2002. A year after surgery, Randy joined Chapter 81 and started visiting at the same hospital where he'd received treatment.

"My experience with Mended Hearts led me to the conclusion that I wanted to spend the rest of my working years in a hospital setting. I think a person who has been a patient makes a better nurse. When I go in that room and they're hugging that pillow to their chests, I know how much they're hurting. A nurse can't know what that patient is feeling, but I do."

Randy thinks of nursing as a calling as much as a job. "I want to work with cardiac patients in some capacity. I've already been told by nurse managers where I visit that when I have my RN, they'll hire me. I do think I can bring a lot to cardiac patients. Even though I've recovered completely, I still have coronary artery disease, so some day I may have surgery again."

Following his calling has not been easy on Randy's family. Instead of working with Maria all day and being home when 12-year-old Marra comes home from school, Randy is in class all day most days, and when he's not in class he has to study. The family downsized to a smaller house with a much smaller mortgage and lower taxes, but there will still be student loans to pay off when he's through at Emory. "I'm very proud to be a Heart Hero, but my wife Maria is my 'heart hero.' She has made all this possible by taking over the business while I go to school. She has been the sole breadwinner for two years and will be for two more, and she is also taking on many responsibilities with Marra — homework and soccer games. We hope when I start working as a nurse that she can go back to school and pursue her life dream of teaching high school English."

Following a dream, living a calling, giving to others — isn't that what life (and recovery) is all about? ❤️