

Billy column – Aug. 11, 2011  
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‘Peace Garden’ brings peace; one  
wonderful hospital brings healing

If you’ve lived long enough, you’ve probably gotten this phone call: A family member or close friend is on the way to the hospital by ambulance.

That’s the call I got from Dr. Jim Wade at the Toccoa Clinic on Thursday afternoon, July 28.

At the time, I was at my desk at the *White County News* in Cleveland, looking at the print job done by press foreman Lee Duncan and his crew on the week’s edition.

Suddenly, my world of whether a four-color photo on a newsprint page was crisp enough changed.

My wife, Patti, 58, was headed to the emergency room at the Northeast Georgia Medical Center in Gainesville. She had made an appointment with Dr. Wade, thinking she may need some medicine for her cholesterol.

But she failed a stress test miserably -- once the treadmill was tilted slightly and speeded up.

Dr. Wade wasted no time and called for an ambulance. I wish I could say that Patti and I had wasted no time the month before. Always healthy and fairly fit, Patti had experienced shortness of breath and a slight pain in her chest since mid-June. She told me about her situation about two weeks before we went on vacation.

“Patti, you need to go to a doctor,” I told her.

“No, it’s nothing,” she replied. “I’ll go after vacation.”

It wasn’t the vacation itself, but being with our two grandchildren that made her put off a doctor’s visit. And, I didn’t insist on it, which didn’t help matters.

But once she made it safely to the Northeast Georgia Medical Center, we could find out what was going on.

After blood tests, EKGs and examinations, the cardiologists knew there was a problem, so they called for a heart catheterization. The procedure was done the next morning, Friday, July 29.

Dr. Andrew Yen went into Patti's wrist with only a tiny prick point and through the arteries in her arm to reach her heart. What he found surprised him. It also surprised Dr. Mark Matthews, the physician who specializes in cardiovascular disease. He first examined Patti when she arrived at the hospital.

The catheterization revealed that she had three major blockages in her heart. Without blinking an eye, Dr. Yen said open heart surgery was the best option. They would bypass the three blocked arteries, using three good veins from Patti's body. We agreed.

Now, I know this sounds all cut and dried, but it wasn't. Patti was scared. I was scared. So were Patti's mother and our two children.

On the day of the surgery, Tuesday, Aug. 2, we all gathered around Patti right before she was wheeled into the operating room. By now, the nurses had worked day and night with Patti, getting her in prime condition for the surgery. She was ready. She smiled and gave a thumbs up before going into surgery.

The doctors had told us to expect a three-hour surgery. After spending an hour in the waiting room, I went outside. It was 90-plus degrees.

I wandered in the new Wilheit-Keys Peace Garden recently built in front of the new North Patient Tower. I then walked to the lower section of the garden. Sitting on one of the benches, alone with my thoughts, I saw the beauty of God's world. The flowers were blooming. Butterflies and bees filled the air, going from flower to flower.

A sense of peace overcame me. After a while, I returned to the waiting room. I had missed the announcement to the family by Patti's surgeon, Dr. Daniel Winston.

Everything had gone great. Patti was a model patient. The veins in her leg were easily harvested, her heart was just the right size and everything went as smoothly as could be. The surgery lasted less than two hours.

Looking back, we realize that Patti was sent to an extraordinary hospital. We already knew about their No. 1 rankings in Georgia in cardiac services and surgery. We knew that the hospital had been designated recently a Top 100 hospital in the nation.

What we saw was the reason why.

The nurses who looked after Patti were outstanding. She always felt like she was in the best of care, both day and night, and she spent eight nights there -- five before the surgery and only three afterwards.

After one particularly rough night when her heart got out of rhythm and she was more afraid, I remember a physician's assistant coming into Patti's room the next morning to exam her. She pronounced that Patti's heart was back in rhythm and everything was going to be okay.

A veil was lifted from Patti's face. From that moment on, she began making improvements up until her surgery. Sometimes the human voice, saying the right words at the right time, can do so much.

We're grateful to God for Dr. Jim Wade, who sent Patti straight to Gainesville to the Northeast Georgia Medical Center. We're also grateful to God for giving the doctors, nurses and clinical support staff the wisdom and skills to do their work.

And, we're grateful for the foresight of those who made the Ronnie Green Heart Center a reality. It's amazing that the first open heart surgery was performed there only nine years ago, in August 2002.

Now, for six consecutive years—2006 to 2011—the Northeast Georgia Medical Center has been rated as Georgia's No. 1 heart hospital.

All we know is that it's No. 1 in our heart, especially in Patti's mended heart.

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