

Joe Whittaker's Life-Saving, Life-Renewing Experience

A Journey of Faith and Medical Expertise

By: Deborah Liv Johnson



Joe and Darlene Whittaker

Joe Whittaker is a man of many talents. A successful business man who hails from Alberta, Canada, he is kind and generous, recently establishing with his wife Darlene a foundation which built and sponsors an orphanage and a school in Zambia, Africa. But what truly sets Joe apart from others is his ability to communicate. "He has the ability to affect people by what he says and how he says it," explains Darlene. "The way he talks to others is a gift...a profound gift."

During the winter months, the Whittakers live in Rancho Mirage. Rising early one morning, Joe walked into the family room to spend some quiet time — he loves the early morning hours. For some reason that day, he decided to go back to bed, something he never did. By 7:15 a.m., Joe could not get up and was unable to speak. Somehow he managed to wake Darlene who took one look at her husband and immediately called 911. She recalls hearing sirens even before she had hung up the phone. Upon arriving in the Tenny Emergency Department, Joe was diagnosed as having had several strokes.

The Whittakers were met by Eisenhower's Stroke Coordinator Deborah Bayer, BSN, RN, CCRN, SCRNP. Bayer, working with Stroke Neurologist Hamid Salari-Namin, MD, assessed and coordinated Joe's care, helping the Whittakers understand his condition and preparing them for the following 24 hours. After performing the initial assessment, Dr. Salari-Namin contacted the on-call Interventional Radiologist, Mehran Ely, MD, who administered intra-arterial tissue plasminogen activator or tPA, a clot-busting medication.

"Dr. Ely told us he was confident that the tPA would work," remembers Darlene. "He also said, 'I'm only a doctor — God does the healing.' I was so impressed with what he shared and was able to relax. His words made me feel more comfortable because we have a very strong faith."

Following the procedure, Joe was transferred to the Critical Care Unit. Dr. Salari-Namin was suspicious that Joe's multiple strokes had come from his heart. When Joe was stabilized, he ordered a transesophageal echocardiogram (TEE) to look into the heart and identify the source of the strokes. Cardiologist Philip Patel, MD, performed the procedure where they discovered unusual findings. In his upper right heart, Joe had a benign tumor called a papillary fibroelastoma. The fibroelastoma looked like a sea anemone that was gathering clots in the right side of his heart. Additionally, Joe had a hole in his heart that allowed for the clots to move from the right side of his heart to the left side and up into his brain. With no time to lose, Joe was evaluated by the cardiovascular surgical team and taken into open heart surgery under the direction of Cardiothoracic Surgeon Joseph Wilson, MD.

"Dr. Wilson told us that Joe needed urgent open heart surgery and his condition was as serious as it gets," says Darlene. "He explained that if more clots continued to escape from Joe's heart, the results could be fatal. They had to act immediately." Joe's surgery went well and he was transferred to the Cardiovascular Surgical Care Unit (CCU). The long, uncertain healing process began.



The Whittaker family, left to right: Jodi, Darlene, Joe and Jacqueline.

Flying from Canada, the Whittakers' two daughters rushed to be with their parents, leaving their husbands to care for their children while they were away. "It was a horrific experience for all of us, because my husband couldn't talk or move his right side. We didn't know what was going to happen," recalls Darlene. "My daughters and I visited Joe every day, and every day on the way to the hospital, I'd pray, Lord, give us a miracle," says Darlene. "We sang quietly and we read to him. For the first four to five days, we didn't get any reaction at all — we didn't know what was going to happen or if he would ever speak or walk again. He was in really rough shape."

Eventually, Joe began to respond to his family's singing by tapping his hand or his foot.

Soon, he was stable enough to leave the CCU. At this time, the Acute Stroke Care team continued to coordinate Joe's care. Joe was sent to the Stroke Unit where specialized nurses, physical therapists, speech therapist and occupational therapists began detailed assessments and early stroke and cardiac rehabilitation. When it was time to begin his next phase of recovery, acute inpatient rehabilitation was recommended. Normally, patients from Canada are transferred back to their country and placed into rehabilitation there. However, the Whittakers were adamant about Joe staying at Eisenhower.

Joe continued his recovery in the Eisenhower Inpatient Rehabilitation Center. "Dr. Weinstein and all the therapists were fabulous," notes Darlene. "Joe had occupational,

speech and physical therapy and they really pushed him. When he finally left the hospital, they wanted him to use a cane, but he told them no — he could walk. I think everyone was surprised at how well he'd done. At one point, we had thought that he would be in a wheelchair for the rest of his life. It was a miracle.”

“We had so many doctors and they were all great,” explains Darlene. “Joe received exceptional care every step of the way. One of our daughters has celiac disease and the cafeteria workers made sure there was special bread for her. We could tell that they genuinely cared about her situation and were willing to help. Everyone, from the cafeteria workers to the cleaning ladies and the volunteers, said they were praying for us. After being at Eisenhower for four weeks, we feel that it was critical that we were here in town when this happened.”

Movement by movement and phrase by phrase, Joe continues his recovery. “Eisenhower — I really feel it was the epitome of the best care we could have had — the best people,” says Joe. “They were all fabulous.”

With incredible determination and an unshakable faith, he slowly explains, “The next time you see me, I'll be speaking like I used to speak.”

There is no reason to believe otherwise.