Loel Lowary

READY FOR HIS NEXT PROJECT

Technically… Loel Lowary is retired. But, spend just a few minutes with the 68-year-old Minnesota and Indian Wells resident and you realize he is involved with so many different projects that he is probably working just as hard as he did when he ran his own computer engineering and software company in Minneapolis - St. Paul.
For Loel, the projects are not work—they are the things he loves to do. In the past year, he has completely remodeled the kitchen of his Minnesota home, built furniture for both houses, learned to cut and install granite, and began the design and construction of a visual arts piece incorporating 500 painted, wooden cubes. And yes, he is cutting and painting all 500 pieces of wood himself.

“I love to play golf, but I play less and less now because I realized I am much happier working on a project than I am on the golf course,” Loel says. “I like to be hands-on, learn how things work, and create something new.”

Loel remodeled the family kitchen in Minnesota, doing almost all of the work himself. “I re-did all of the cabinetry and installed new wood floors. I taught myself carpentry skills after watching people work on remodel projects both here in the desert and in Minnesota,” Loel says. He also decided he wanted to learn granite work, and so approached a local granite company in Palm Desert. “I basically did an internship there,” explains Loel. “I worked in the shop, watched and helped with installations. I wanted to learn by watching the experts, and then try the work myself.”

Most of Loel’s projects involve physical activity, and he has always been in good shape. He exercises regularly, has never been seriously ill, and quit smoking more than 30 years ago. His parents lived well into their 80s and 90s. So, when Loel began having severe chest pains last winter, the last thing he thought it might be was his heart.

“I had just finished exercising, and suddenly felt a huge pain in my chest and had trouble breathing.” Loel says he lay down, but that didn’t help. “I know now I should have called 911 immediately,” Loel says. “But, I didn’t because I didn’t think I could be having a heart attack. That was a huge mistake.”

Loel’s wife Mary was in Minnesota helping their daughter, who was undergoing chemotherapy for breast cancer, and the grandchildren, so Loel had a neighbor drive him to Eisenhower’s Tennity Emergency Department. Eisenhower Cardiologist Khôi Lê, MD and the cardiac team knew immediately what was happening to Loel—he was suffering from an acute myocardial infarction—he was having a heart attack.

“It was all very quick and very precise—the teamwork was amazing,” Loel says.

A heart attack occurs when the blood flow to a section of the heart muscle becomes blocked, usually by a clot or a narrowing of one of the major arteries. If the flow of blood isn’t restored quickly, the heart muscle becomes damaged from lack of oxygen. The key is to begin treatment as quickly as possible. Research shows that intervention is most effective when started within 90 minutes of the onset of symptoms.
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—Loel Lowary

“We move very quickly,” says Dr. Lê.“We do an initial EKG [electrocardiogram] within minutes, which allows us to diagnose the majority of major heart attacks. It also helps us determine which blood vessel is involved, which can save us five to 10 minutes, which may make a crucial difference. The faster you can begin treating the cause of the heart attack, the better the patient’s outcome.”

Dr. Lê discovered that Loel had a significant blockage in his major coronary artery. “For most patients, including Loel, the blockage is caused by a combination of plaque that has broken loose from the arterial wall, and a blood clot that forms around it,” explains Dr. Lê. “So, treating with blood thinners alone is not enough. You have to physically remove the clot and plaque, and then open up the artery using a stent or a balloon.”

Dr. Lê and the cath lab team were able to restore flow in Loel’s artery, remove a major clot, and insert a stent within 45 minutes of his arrival at Eisenhower.

Although the team was able to move quickly to treat Loel and save his heart from further damage, Dr. Lê stresses the importance of calling 911 if patients have any symptoms of a heart attack. “Never take yourself to the hospital,”Dr. Lê shares. “First, the paramedics can begin treating you in the ambulance, doing what they can to keep oxygen flowing to the heart. But even more important, if a patient goes into arrhythmia, if his or her heart stops beating, the paramedic team has equipment in the ambulance to try to re-start the heart and can keep the patient alive. I cannot stress enough the importance of calling 911.”

After a few weeks, Loel began the Tamkin Cardiac and Pulmonary Rehabilitation program at Eisenhower’s Renker Wellness Center (please see “Cardiac Rehab Explained” on page 50). The Tamkin staff developed an individualized program for Loel that included exercise, nutrition and lifestyle counseling, plus regular monitoring of his heart rate, blood pressure and other key indicators. Loel had sessions with the cardiac rehab team three times a week for eight weeks.

“They did a wonderful job at the Renker Wellness Center. The program is very well-run, and I was quite impressed,” says Loel. “They are with you every step of the way, monitoring you the whole time. With the exercise program, if you are not working hard enough, they push you; if you are working too hard, they slow you down. I really saw improvement from one week to the next.”

Now, three months after his heart attack, Loel says he feels fine. “Dr. Lê and his team saved my life,” says Loel. “I am very, very fortunate to have been treated at Eisenhower.”

Dr. Lê says that for the cardiac team, treating patients in the throes of a major heart attack like Loel can be tremendously gratifying. “It is incredibly rewarding to be able to see patients, understand what is happening to them, and then take the necessary steps to stop their heart attack and save their lives,” shares Dr. Lê. “For all of us—doctors, nurses, paramedics, technicians—it’s why we do what we do.”

Loel is now well along on the design and construction of the wooden art installation for his home in Minnesota. “I have more than 500 cubes of wood—birch, oak, maple,” Loel says. “I am painting them different colors to create an abstract design, and mounting them on a black background. I am excited to see how it turns out.” It is obviously a project that is close to his heart.

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