

Surgery provides new lease on life for resident

“I’s a miracle! I have a new life!” These words of profound appreciation and gratitude were expressed by Stouffville’s Eric Ripp following double lung transplant surgery successfully performed at Toronto General Hospital, Aug. 21.

The 52-year-old husband and father of two is recovering from a rare disease known as scleroderma, an illness of which there is no cure. “My lungs were turning to stone,” he said.

It was while a teacher on the staff of Wexford Collegiate, Scarborough, that an early form of the illness struck.

“I knew something was wrong, but was unsure what it was,” he remembers. For two more years he continued his teaching role. However, in 2010, he became aware that, while working outside, both hands were becoming uncomfortably cold, even while wearing gloves. “No way could I warm them,” he said. Later, his finger joints began aching and finger ends began to swell.

Arthritis was suspected, but tests proved negative.

Symptoms of a problem more serious included extreme fatigue and body weakness.

“On returning from playing hockey, my



Roaming Around

with Jim Thomas

legs felt like rubber,” he said. A shortness of breath was also evident. But stress tests weren’t helpful.

It was following nine holes of golf at the Markham Green, Box Grove that full impact of the illness hit home. “I couldn’t walk up the last hill,” he vividly recalls. “I had to rest.” It was then he realized something was seriously wrong.

Action quickly followed. A physician, specializing in lung issues at a clinic adjacent to Markham Stouffville Hospital, took one look at Eric’s hands and immediately ordered a CT scan. The result definitely

showed both lungs were scarred.

Eric was admitted first to Toronto General Hospital, where he was seen by a lung specialist, and later to adjacent Mount Sinai Hospital, where he was visited by a physician. Various treatments followed in an effort to save the lungs, without success.

“Every effort was made to slow the disease down,” Eric said, “but my condition steadily worsened.” He was told that, at some point, a lung transplant would be needed. Without surgery, his life expectancy would likely be no longer than five years, he learned.

Knowing this, Eric endeavoured to make the best of a serious situation. “I tried as much as possible to live normally by golfing, walking and attending respiratory programs in Whitby and Markham. He placed a handicapped flag on his golf cart.

The gravity of his plight was lessened significantly thanks to the support of his family, wife Sharon, son Adam and daughter Kelly, plus a multitude of friends and neighbours.

“Everyone was fantastic,” he said including his closest associate, Don Geldart of Stouffville, a lung transplant survivor. “He gave me the confidence I would need as surgery time neared,” he said. That phase was anticipated in six

months. However, on Aug. 20, a telephone call was received from Toronto General Hospital. “We have the lungs,” the informant stated. “We’ll be there in two hours,” Eric replied.

But the operation was delayed until the next day. That’s when the “ready to go” decision was announced.

How did you feel? Eric was asked.

“I knew I’d be in the hands of a higher power,” he replied. “I was relatively calm.”

“Calmer than me,” Sharon interjected.

The transplant, under the direction of Dr. Laura Donahoe, lasted 8-1/2 hours. Hospital recovery extended over a period of three weeks, including three days in intensive care.

“The second day I required no oxygen,” said Eric. “The third day I was up walking. The second week it felt good to again breath fresh outside air.”

Now home and relatively active, Eric says not a day goes by that he doesn’t silently thank the lung donor for his/her decision. “When looking down, I hope he or she knows just how much the gift is appreciated.”

Both he and Sharon wish more people would agree to so selfless an act.

“For me, it’s a new beginning rather than a beginning of the end,” Eric concluded.



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