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Campaigning for Heart and Stroke

Allen Brooks, this year's Heart and Stroke campaign chairperson, recently visited local businesses with his mother Gail to let them know about the "Dress Red" event, scheduled for St. Valentine's Day, Feb. 14. On that day, businesses and the public are encouraged to dress in red to raise awareness of the Heart and Stroke Foundation. Cathy Albert, centre, the assistant manager of customer service at the Royal Bank in Winchester, took the information for her workplace.

Your donations will help give someone a second chance.

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Produced in association with the Dundas Chapter of the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Ontario

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Still going strong 10 years after rare heart surgery

by Rebecca van Noppen
Chieftain Staff Reporter

It's been 10 years since a golf-ball-sized tumor changed the course of Clarence Roberts' life.

The tumor was discovered on his heart, shortly after he experienced a rare fainting spell at his Matilda Township farm where he lives with his wife Audrey.

"A large tumor, bigger than a golf ball, was hanging to the valves in my heart," he recalls.

Roberts, now 86, was taken to the St. Lawrence Medical Clinic in Morrisburg where Dr. Rene "picked up a problem on his scope."

"He said to me 'there's something in your heart and it's got to come out,'" Roberts says. "He sent me to the Winchester District Memorial Hospital and there I was told the same thing."

From there, Roberts was taken to a Cornwall hospital and then to the Ottawa General where Dr. LeMay took over his case. Roberts went through a series of tests and when the medical staff discovered what the problem was, they immediately notified well-known heart surgeon Dr. Keon.

"He (Dr. LeMay) jumped in the car and went to Dr. Keon and pulled him out of a meeting (to tell him about me)," Roberts says. "He (Dr. Keon) told me 'I'll take the tumor out of your heart and you'll have nothing to worry about.'"

His operation took place on July 5, 1986. By July 20, he was picking beans in his garden.

In the meantime, his golf-ball-sized tumor was being preserved in a jar as a future example to medical students.

According to Roberts, he had a rare tumor that was removed through the diligence and hard work of the medical staff. Today, he still speaks fondly of the doctors that conducted the operation and took care of him.

"I was very fortunate with this heart business," he says. "Dr. LeMay worked day and night on it...He was a great help to me and I felt a lot of confidence."

Roberts' tumor was rare. To this day, he still doesn't know when the problem started. He never smoked and didn't drink alot.

However, he does recall an episode in 1943 during the war when he worked in the Navy. He was on a destroyer when he fainted. He was taken to a Boston hospital, but the doctors couldn't find anything wrong.

Since that experience, he continued life as usual. Over the years, he worked hard, jogged every morning and was an active citizen. Not once, did he suspect that something was wrong.

Now 10 years after his operation, suffering from atrial fibrillation (heart skips a beat) and severe angina, Roberts has to be careful not to over-exert himself. He's not as active as he used to be, and he has to take a number of pills each day.

"I have to take everything at a slow pace," he says. "But I have a great feeling that I'll get better to some extent."

Although he takes life a little slower, Roberts continues to enjoy farming. The Roberts' still have 40 head of cattle, and with aid from hired help are able to enjoy country living. Starting in the farming business at age 68, he is not quite ready to give it up. Farming is something he's always wanted to do, and he wants to keep doing it a little longer.

"I'm not going to have them (cattle) forever, but I want them and I like them," he says.

Working for O'Keefe Breweries as an engineer for a number of years, farming was a distant dream until 18 years ago. In 1996, he continues to fulfil that dream on a daily basis, and he plans to, for many years to come.


Audrey and Clarence Roberts

Dundas chapter president looks back on the past year

by Margaret Reynolds
President, Dundas County

Once again we are approaching February, Heart Month, when approximately 340 residents of Dundas County will be out during this cold month going door-to-door collecting funds for the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Ontario.

I personally thank all these canvassers for their dedicated efforts on behalf of the Foundation, but I also thank our board members and volunteers who spend many hours throughout the year helping in a variety of ways - in organizing health promotion and fund-raising activities, in the selling and buying of raffle tickets, or by participating in fund-raisers or sponsoring those who do participate.

The monies raised for research have paid great dividends. Deaths from heart disease and stroke have been reduced by 35 per cent over the last decade. Several key areas of heart and stroke research are on the verge of major breakthroughs - in areas such as correcting heart defects before birth, and in the development of drugs to minimize and prevent brain damage from strokes.

The Foundation has created a 1-800 Healthline to supply heart and stroke-related information. Public awareness concerning women, heart disease and stroke has been increased across the province through media and information symposia, and the funding of research programs. There is an upcoming symposium in our area on Feb. 12.

Through your generous support in the past, you have all been a part of the successes of the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Ontario. I thank you for that and seek your continued support this month as the canvassers call on you.

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Youngster gets a new lease on life

by C. Thompson
Leader Staff

After coping with a congenital heart disorder for most of his short life, 14-year-old Allen Brooks was given another chance last March.

Allen was born with a rare condition called truncus arteriosis. Instead of a separate artery leading from the heart to the lungs and one to the rest of the body, he had to share one main artery and a valve for both functions. The condition results in excess pressure, flooding the lungs with blood.

Diagnosed at the age of only one month, he had two closed heart surgeries performed by Dr. Wilbert Keon during the spring of 1981-2. Surgery called "pulmonary banding" consisted of banding the artery, to take some pressure off the lungs.

If Allen was lucky enough to survive at all, doctors predicted a two year lifespan at the most.

After surgery, parents Gail and Martin followed the advice to "wait and see" along with six-month check-ups at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario until the age of six. At that time, doctors found permanent damage to lungs and heart from excess pressure on the lungs, and corrective surgery was cancelled.

However, the possibility of transplant was held as an option, since success was being reported with children.

Despite the odds, Allen's health remained relatively good from age six to 14, and doctors held out hope for an eventual transplant. He was going to school, riding a bike, and was seldom ill during an eight year interval. "We were very lucky," Gail said.

Allen was in the care of Dr. Peter Vlad at CHEO, while Dr. Keon of the Ottawa Heart Institute maintained a role from the sidelines.

Allen was not put on an "active" list for transplants at the time, since the optimum age for transplants is after puberty. During assessment, there was discussion whether he should be listed, but doctors decided this option didn't necessarily guarantee an improvement.

"You're taking an extremely large chance, and they couldn't guarantee he would survive the surgery," Gail said.

"They said if he could get to 15 that would be optimum because there is some retardation in growth and development for the year they're on extremely heavy drug doses. The longer they wait, the better," she added.

Turn for the worse

However in the fall of 1994, Allen's health took a turn for the worse. He finally came down with a sinus infection he couldn't shake.

Allen was hospitalized at CHEO and didn't come home for the next five months. On December 16, Allen suffered his first heart attack at age 13.

Finding a transplant became urgent, and he was placed high on the priority list. But finding a donor was easier said than done. Even if a donor was found with a heart of the right size, and correct blood type. There was only a 20 per cent chance Allen's body would accept the transplant because of a high rejection rate due to intravenous drugs to fight chronic infections.

Allen's possibility of rejection in September was 40 per cent. By Christmas it had jumped to 60 per cent and skyrocketted to 95 per cent between Christmas and March.

Hundreds of potential matches were investigated, but one possibility after another was ruled out because of his high rejection rate.

On February 22, Allen had his second heart attack while in intensive care. As fate would have it, most of the staff was still present, including the Head Cardiologist. A physician immediately did CPR on him and succeeded in getting his overtaxed heart functioning again.

But his critical condition continued and he was placed on life support systems for respiration and kidney dialysis.

Race against time

At this time, the drive to find a donor became a real race. March 8 became a turning point in Allen's life, when the family heard a suitable donor heart was available.

"We were just ecstatic, we couldn't believe he got the chance," Gail added. At the time, Allen had agreed on an interview for the Children's Telethon, but never had the interview, because he was being prepared for surgery.

"When he got the news, he was on morphine and thought they were kidding," Gail said.

"He was reasonably sedated but being a very active child, he remembers a lot. We were told he shouldn't have remembered any of it, that's how sedated he was and the toxic condition he was in."

Chronic pneumonia, a generalized infection and problems with kidney and liver function added to his troubles at the time of transplant. Levels of creatnine in kidneys and bilirubin in the liver were so high, doctors said they had never seen someone so ill pull through. In fact, his case was known as one of the most difficult heart transplants.

In a successful operation by Dr. Keon that took 12 hours including preparation time, Allen received not only a new heart, but new pulmonary arteries as well.

He stayed at the Heart Institute during the crucial period following the operation. During 51 days of recovery, Allen had two bouts of pneumonia. He returned home with pneumonia at the end of April, still on intravenous drugs to combat the infection which were continued at home through the VON.

Anti-rejection drugs which have the effect of putting the immune system to sleep were given in high oral doses following surgery and continued in smaller doses as the months went on. Allen's kidneys started to function better and his health to improve. Although he is feeling better, it takes a year to make a full recovery.

It is now surprising that Allen had little to say about his survival of this ordeal. To his parents, he is just like "any other kid of 14, looking forward to finishing high school and taking up a career."

"We were encouraged by the knowledge that many other heart transplant patients were leading normal and active lives. Some will not be able to wait long enough."

It is the family's urgent wish for everyone to make a commitment to organ donation, so that others may have a similar chance.



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Winchester couple deals with changes stroke brings

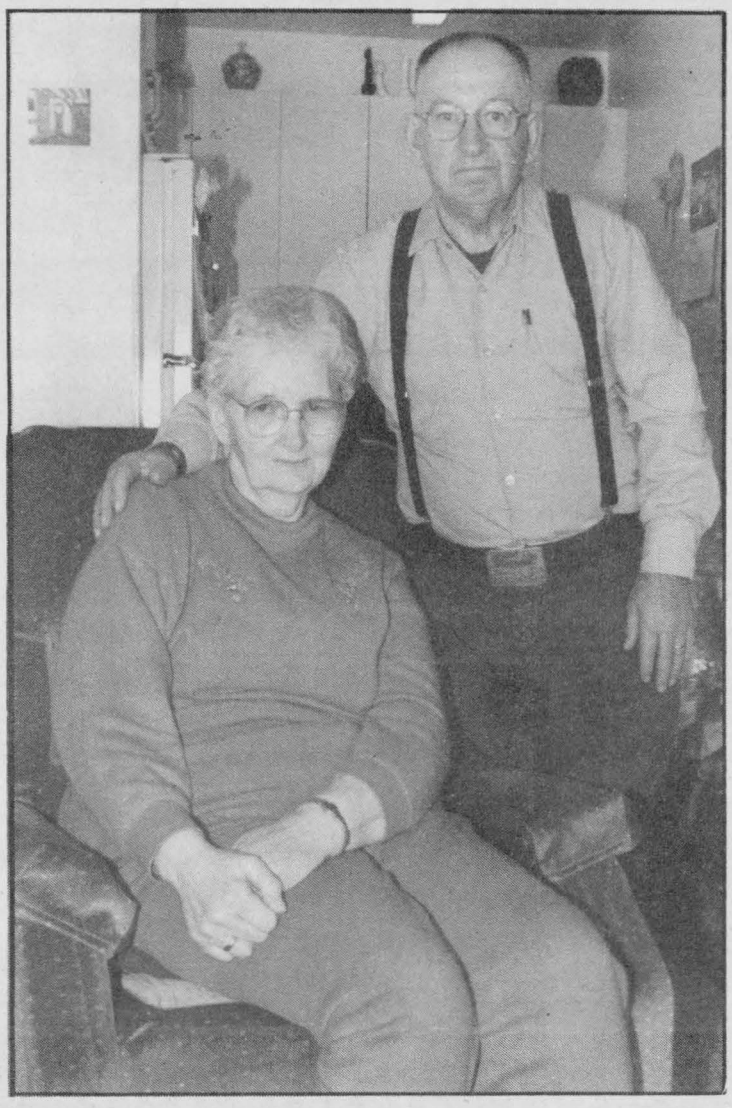
by Liz Edwards
Press Staff

Mae Harper can't remember the day her life changed.

Nor can she remember anything from the 16 days following Nov. 24, 1988. The Winchester resident, then 55, was in a coma at the time - a result of what she calls a "man-made" stroke.

The stroke was a result of complications from an operation for an aneurysm on the right side of the brain that began bleeding while she slept on Nov. 24. An aneurysm occurs when the wall of an artery becomes weak and then dilates. Aneurysms frequently bleed and can be fatal.

Harper's husband Arthur woke that night when her hand jerked violently and hit him on the nose. After one look at Mae, Arthur called an ambulance. Eventually she was taken from Winchester District Memorial Hospital to the Ottawa General.



Mae and Arthur Harper

Sitting in their living room at the Beachcroft Apartments in Winchester, Arthur, 68, helps Mae, 61, fill in the blanks of their story. He can remember what Mae can't. He will always remember that particularly stressful time when he wasn't sure if his wife would ever come home.

Stroke has complications beyond physical problems. It affects whole families, changing their lives in ways they never anticipated. In the past years, the Harpers have learned how much. But they've also learned how to fight to carry on.

Doctors operated to fix the aneurysm but following the procedure, Mae had a stroke and was both comatose and paralyzed for weeks afterward.

The little she can recall from that time is vague and confusing. She didn't know where she was or what was happening to her. The first time Arthur realized she was aware of her surroundings was at Christmas dinner in the hospital.

"She said something about having a candlelight dinner," says Arthur.

Mae lost a whole season. It was almost like falling asleep and waking up to find the world changed.

"Before I took sick, everyone was in a turmoil for Christmas. When I woke up, it was all over. Flick of a switch and it was all over."

But she could have lost a lot more than just the Christmas season, the Harpers realize. Doctors told Arthur, Mae wouldn't wake up, then they told him she'd never walk, and she wouldn't come home.

Mae has surpassed all their expectations. She has been home for years now and walks daily around the village with her husband. She can manage to cook their meals now, and do some light housework around their small home. Yellow knitted baby clothes and a ball of yellow yarns are evidence she is keeping busy even when she's sitting down.

But her accomplishments have come with great difficulty. Mae tires easily. Coffee acts like alcohol for Mae so she can't drink it. Her balance is off so she falls easily, even badly breaking her arm in one spill last fall. She has tunnel vision and her short term memory is sketchy at times.

The stroke also changed her personality.

"I used to be easy going. I used to babysit kids. Now I worry and stew, I can't help it...as they say, you make a mountain out of a molehill," she says.

Every gain toward normalcy has been a struggle. She spent almost six months in speech, occupational and physical therapy at St. Vincent's Hospital in Ottawa.

Arthur has been her inspiration for recovery. He kept telling her she would come home even when she wouldn't believe it. During the time Mae was in the hospital, he visited her every night after finishing his job as a milk truck driver. Arthur was so tired and frazzled, he would write notes to himself so he could remember what he did during the day. He said he managed with a lot of help.

"You never know how many friends you've got until you need them," he says.

But Mae gives a lot of credit to him during the tough times.

"The inner strength. You hear them talk about it. He was running on the inner strength," says Mae.

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Mrs. Moira McLeod, Reg. Nurse
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