

A SECOND CHANCE AT LIFE

BOB SMIETANA

THE FIRST SIGN that there was something wrong with Dick Rasanen's heart came four years ago while he was taking down the family Christmas tree. As he was taking some lights off the top of the tree, he started having chest pain.

Rasanen, who was forty-three at the time, thought he was too young to be having a heart attack. He didn't want to alarm anyone, but knew that something wasn't right. "All of a sudden I had what I look back on now as classic symptoms of a heart attack," he says. "I had pain in my chest and got really clammy. I didn't say anything. I just went back in to the kitchen and sat down for a few minutes."

The symptoms went away after Rasanen sat down. What he didn't know was that it would be almost four years until his heart would feel right again.



*The Rasanen Family:
Paula, Dick, Jenna,
Krista, and Ben*

One pastor's
journey to receiving
a new heart

When he told Paula, his wife, about the symptoms, she was concerned as well. They decided that Dick, pastor of Broadway Covenant Church in Rockford, Illinois, would go and get a stress test at the Galter Life Center while attending the Covenant Midwinter Conference in Chicago a few weeks later.

He failed the stress test. "I could tell something was wrong when they photocopied the EKG," he says. "They said they had just talked to their cardiologist and I should see my doctor as soon as possible."

The next day, Rasanen walked out to the mailbox to get the paper and came back having chest pains. He and Paula went to see his doctor that same day.

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The doctor took a look at the EKG and admitted Rasanen to the hospital immediately. Doctors found a blockage in Rasanen's right coronary artery. He had an angioplasty that night to put in two metal stents to keep the artery open. In April, he was back in the hospital for another stent procedure to take care of another blockage. This procedure failed, causing the artery to close up. That night, he had a major heart attack and emergency triple bypass surgery.

After the surgery, Rasanen was "sick as a dog for about three months." He recovered, but his heart had been damaged. He was diagnosed with congestive heart failure and a possible aneurysm on his heart. His cardiologist in Rockford referred him to the Rush Heart Failure and Cardiac Transplant Program in Chicago. In May 1998, doctors at Rush told him that he needed a heart transplant.

Mitchell Saltzberg, a cardiologist at Rush, says that Rasanen was an "end-stage" heart failure patient. "End-stage means someone who has got very severe heart dysfunction," Saltzberg says, "and has really no other options to try and improve the heart function. That's where Dick was at."

Rasanen's health showed unexpected improvement in 1999. His injection fraction, which measures how much

blood his heart was pumping, jumped from under 25 percent to over 40 percent. But by February 2000, tests showed his heart had deteriorated. Doctors told him his test results place him in a group with a 20 percent survival rate over two years. He was placed on the list of patients awaiting a heart transplant in March.

Rasanen says that he really didn't realize how sick he was getting. Doctors at Rush told him that he was probably a "minimizer," someone who would say he was feeling fine when he really wasn't. But his health continued to deteriorate. Simple tasks, like reading a newspaper, would tire him out.

Throughout his health struggles,

members of Broadway Covenant rallied around Rasanen. During several services, the congregation gathered around him to pray for his health. With his name on the waiting list, he was given a beeper so the transplant unit could reach him if a donor heart was available. At that point, Amy Bliss and Karen Holmertz, members of the church, organized an on-call schedule of people who could help the family as they waited.

Bliss, who has a background in nursing and social work, came up with the idea for the schedule. She ran the idea by church chair Gary Ecklund. He suggested that she talk with Holmertz. She and Holmertz talked, then started looking for volunteers who could drive the Rasanens to the hospital, run errands, or transport their three children. People signed up to deliver meals three evenings a week while Paula was at work.

"We had a list with one person on every single day of the month with their phone number," Bliss says, "and they agreed to be on call. Paula could call that person, say that Dick got beeped, and that person would coordinate making sure that the children got picked up, making sure they got fed that night, how they were going to get to the city to meet

Bob Smietana is associate editor of The Covenant Companion

"God Is the Author of Life"

Delores Wiens, the chaplain for the heart transplant unit, was at Rush on the night Dick Rasanen got his new heart. She spent some time with Paula Rasanen that night, helping her work through the anxiety of waiting during the surgery. Wiens describes some of the struggles that patients go through as they wait for a heart transplant. The biggest struggle, she says, is knowing that in order for them to get a heart, someone else has to die.

"But I tell them God is not the author of death, he is the author of life," she says. "He is redemptive and this heart transplant is God's redemptive act of bringing life out of death. With the donor, I like to remind this person that this is bittersweet—there is the loss of their loved one, but there is also the joy of giving life."

Wiens has been the chaplain of the transplant unit since it opened in July 1994. It was her first assignment after becoming an Episcopal priest that same year. Initially, she attended all of the transplants no matter what time of the day or night. "Then I realized that I was too old for that," she says, "so now I am just here during the day." She also does one twenty-four hour on-call shift per month. She was on-call the night the Rasanens came in and was able to stay with them.

The other major factor she helps patients deal with is fear and anxiety about the transplant surgery. In one case, she went to talk to Greg, a thirty-two year-old man who was waiting for a transplant. When she got in his room, he said, "I wouldn't be telling you the truth if I wasn't telling you that I am terrified."

Wiens then told him the story of the disciples crossing the Sea of Galilee in Mark 4, where Jesus calms the storm. "What is the is the nugget of truth in that story?" she asked. When he couldn't answer, she told him, "If Jesus is in your boat, you won't sink."

Thirty minutes after Wiens left, Greg got the call that there was a heart waiting for him. When Wiens got back Monday, the nurses told her that he had the transplant and that he had been asking for her. When she walked into the room, Greg smiled and told her, "Jesus was in my boat." □

the family if that was needed.”

The schedule went into affect on a limited basis in June, and then everyday starting in July. As Rasanen’s health got worse, Paula got help with routine tasks like taking Ben, fifteen, to football practice or picking up Jenna, fourteen, and Krista, twelve, from school. “If we needed anything on that day,” she says, “we would call that person on that calendar, and if they couldn’t do it they would find somebody. So everyday, we had a guardian. Those are things that seem so practical, but they are so important.”

Being able to take care of the Rasans helped the congregation deal with his illness. And it allowed people to use their gifts. Some people had time to give, and were able to be on-call as drivers. And some of the retired women in the church, who weren’t able to drive, felt like they could contribute by cooking a meal. Others, who were very busy, still felt that they could help by picking up the kids from school.

“We didn’t know quite what we were doing when we started,” Holmertz said. “People wanted to do something and we felt better by helping. I kept telling Dick and Paula that if people can do some-

thing, they feel better.”

It took some convincing for Rasanen to allow the congregation to really help him. When Bliss and Holmertz announced their plan at a congregation business meeting, Bliss says, “he sat with his head in his hands, saying that he couldn’t believe he was going to need this much help.”

The help from the congregation has allowed Rasanen the freedom to get well without the pressure to perform at work. “I feel cared for as a person,” he says, “not as the pastor or heaven forbid the employee, but being cared for as a person and being allowed to get well. I feel like I have been set free while they have continued to support me.”

Doctors told Rasanen that he might have several false alarms before the right donor heart was available. The final decision to transplant would be made at the last moment, at what the doctors called “zero hour.” He got the first call on September 4.

It was Dr. Saltzberg on the phone, saying they had a heart that was a match, but they wouldn’t know until zero hour. They family rushed to the hospital that night, and Rasanen went into the oper-

ating room at about six in the morning.

“I knew when they put me out that there was a chance this would not go,” he says. “They woke me up and told me it wasn’t a go—there was something wrong with the donor heart. But we came away realizing we could do this.”

Paula was home for the next call, at about 11:30 on Monday morning, September 11. The nurse from the clinic told her that they had tried to page Rasanen but he hadn’t answered. (He was at the local hospital, visiting someone from church.) There was a sense of urgency. He had to be at Rush by three that afternoon, or the hospital would call the next person on the list.

“I just hung up and thought, ‘I will find him,’” Paula says. “I was praying and calling and he walked through the door.”

They left for the hospital soon afterwards. Sally Gill, the associate pastor at Broadway, was on call that day and drove them to the hospital. The weather was bad that afternoon, with thunder and lightning. They arrived around quarter to three. By quarter to four, Rasanen’s lab work was all done, and they were ready to take him into surgery.

Muskegon, Michigan: The Coots Family

On December 22, 1999, Wally Coots was in a staff meeting when he received news that his ten-year-old son Ethan had been diagnosed with leukemia. By Christmas Eve, Ethan was in a Grand Rapids, Michigan, hospital, where he spent most of the next three and a half months undergoing chemotherapy treatments.

Coots serves as minister to youth and families at Forest Park Covenant Church in Muskegon, Michigan. Shortly after the church found out about Ethan’s condition, the family was given \$4,000 from an anonymous donor to help defray medical expenses. As Ethan underwent chemotherapy, church members and friends would drive his fourteen-year-old brother Chad to the hospital for visits. The family received gift certificates to help pay for gas for the forty-five-minute drives from Muskegon to Grand Rapids. Other practical gifts included grocery certificates, childcare, and dog care. Some even cleaned and sterilized the Coots house when Ethan came home in-between treatments.

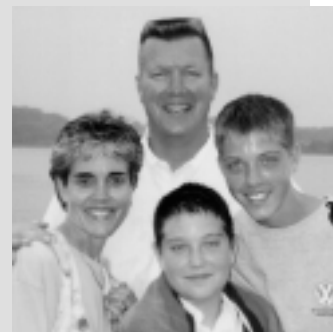
Prayer also became a vital element that encouraged the family. One parishioner made laminated bookmarks with Ethan’s picture and a favorite Bible verse (Psalm 20:7). They passed out hundreds of those to people as a reminder to

pray for Ethan. Another person gave wristbands to children in the church to remind them to pray for Ethan. They passed them out to people at the local schools. Teens and adults got wind of the bands and asked for their own as well. Wally tearfully recalled walking onto various school campuses and seeing the wristbands on students as they waved to him.

“We haven’t even been able to keep track of the generosity, but we were overwhelmed by the gifts, the cards, the flowers,” says Coots. “And so many people gave anonymously—we have no idea who some of those people are.”

The chemotherapy proved effective in treating Ethan’s leukemia. At his six-month check up following the chemotherapy, he was given a clean bill of health.

“We must have gotten two dozen phone calls beforehand from people telling us they were praying for us,” Coots says, “and another two dozen afterward asking how the test went. We’ve felt [everyone at church] praying for us.” □



Wally, Donna, Chad, and Ethan Coots

"I just remember looking at Dick," Paula says, "and thinking without a moment's hesitation that I would see him after the surgery and this will be different."

After Rasanen was taken into the operating room, Paula waited for confirmation that the transplant was a go. Many people from church, including Holmertz, came in to wait with Paula. Tim Ramgren, the youth pastor at Broadway, brought the two oldest kids. Paula's father brought Krista.

Eventually, Mary Piper, who was the nurse on the heart procurement team,

". . . life is too short and Christ is too risen for a lot of things that we waste our lives on."

came out to talk to Paula. She had just been in the room with Dick and saw the surgeon place the heart inside his chest. She told Paula not to worry, because "it is a very good heart."

When the surgery was over, Paula watched as they wheeled Dick by the waiting area. Then the staff came and brought her, Ben, Jenna, and Krista into the room. She says she could tell that something was different about him right away.

"I never allowed myself any doubt," she said. "I dealt with the realities, talked them over to myself, but I didn't allow any doubt. Just looking at him, that was just a marvelous thing that's hard to put into words. Watching someone who is very, very sick become very, very well."

Rasanen says that once he woke up, he could feel the difference right away. For one thing, he could breathe without gasping for breath, something that he could not do before. He was also up walking within a few days, and was much more alert than he had been. In some ways, he felt his old self again.

"I didn't really feel that I had someone else's heart," he says. "I felt that I was more myself again. But to realize that this gift came about because someone else died is amazing. And you can't help but wonder, why should I be so blessed. You always come back to the basic answer: because it has nothing to do with you—it's because God is good. I grew up repeating that prayer around the dinner table, you know, God is great,

God is good, and it seems at various times in my life I have just relearned that, and this certainly is the case."

Following the surgery, Rasanen had a series of biopsies on his heart. Each time, the heart showed no signs of rejections. He has continued the biopsies since coming home. He will have eighteen total in the first two years, and then twice a year after that. Rasanen will be on anti-rejection medicine for the rest of his life.

Since coming home, Rasanen has continued to recover. He, Paula, and the family rejoice in the little things. Paula

says she is glad to have her old husband back. She is glad to see the little signs that he is well, like seeing him stay up late to do the dishes or hearing him yell at the dog.

"He came in and said, 'I just yelled at the dog,' and I called the kids and told them, 'You guys come here, Dad is yelling at the dog,'" she says. "He hadn't been able to do that because after noon his voice would have been like a whisper. And I was so I excited he was yelling at the dog. Normally I am not like that when someone yells at my dog."

The church has continued to support Rasanen, allowing him time off to heal. He was back in November for a service when the church's children's minister was honored. At that time, all he could manage to say without breaking down in tears was "thank you." He started back to work in mid-January.

Rasanen says that receiving the gift of life from the heart donor has reinforced the gift of life that Christ gives to all of us. "Before the transplant happened, I told the congregation that one of the things that hit home for me was that life is too short and Christ is too risen for a lot of things that we waste our lives on. I still feel that way, even though I went from feeling that I might be living the end of my life to now all of a sudden having the Lord bring me to a place where life seems wide open again. Life is too short and Christ is too risen for a lot of stuff that we get bogged down in." □

Santa Ana, California: The Salas Family

The summer of 2000 was supposed to be an exciting time for Pastor Ed Salas and Tapestry Covenant Church in Santa Ana, California. A celebration for their new worship service facility was in the works and the church had enjoyed steady growth over fifteen months.

On June 8, 2000, everything changed. Ed's nine-year-old son Timothy had experienced some dizziness and went to the doctor for a checkup. A routine diagnostic test revealed a quarter-sized tumor in Timothy's brain. Within twenty-four hours, he was in surgery to remove the tumor.

The night before the surgery was difficult, but Salas says it also was one of the more touching events in his ministry at Tapestry Covenant. Several people,

including a pediatrician who attended the church and the church's worship leader, Cesar Ramirez, came to the church to pray for the family. People from church also prayed with the Salases while they were at the hospital with Timothy.



Dr. Muhonen examines Timothy Salas

Michael Muhonen, a Christian doctor at Children's Hospital of Orange County, performed the surgery on Timothy. Although the tumor was cancerous, the surgery was a success. After four days the medical staff reported that there was no evidence the cancer had spread.

"Doctor Muhonen told us he had a nine-year old too, and said he would care for our son as if he were his own," Salas says. "Ginny and I felt that it was a confirmation that our God was watching over us during a difficult time."

Salas is grateful for the myriad of ways in which people have shown their love for him and his family. "It's not so much what people say, but the way that people will tenderly stand by you that is important."

There has been no sign that the cancer has spread, and Timothy will continue forty-nine-day cycles of chemotherapy until August. He can't go to school and he's susceptible to illness due to the chemotherapy. "We're praying for complete healing," Salas says. "And the doctors believe because they got the tumor when it was small that there can be complete healing." □