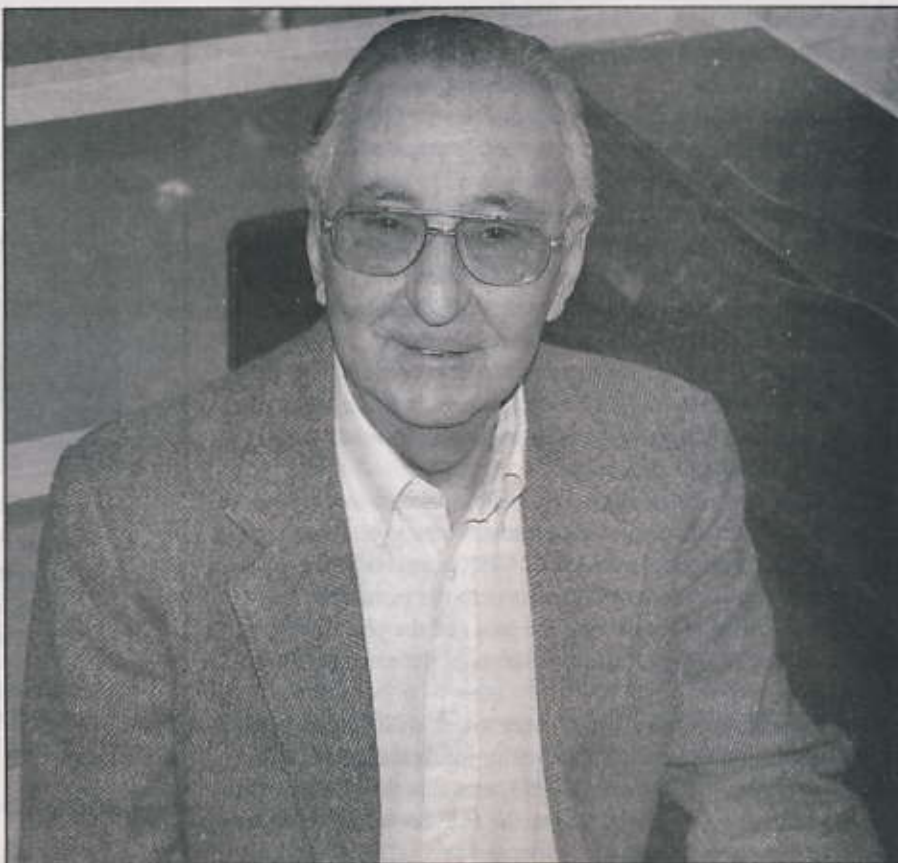


Heart- Two-Heart

By Harry Anderson

The American Heart Association has designated February National Heart Month. This article, therefore, is most timely; for it is about two of our neighbors who came close to death because of defective hearts but who today vigorously add to the quality of life in Smithfield. Here are their stories.

Francis ("Fran") DeLage, whose home is off Smith Avenue, knew all his life that he was born with a "bum heart" (*cardiomyopathy* – malfunctioning valves). In 1931, however, little could be done to restore health to a "bum heart." He simply accepted his fate, went through the grades in school, and married Ruth, and fathered four daughters and a son. When the Korean Conflict peaked, six times the draft board summoned him to duty – each time, because of his heart condition, he was deferred. On the seventh call up, however, he was taken. "At that time," he says, "anyone who could walk was drafted." After basic training and a stint at Aberdeen Proving Grounds to learn about ordinance, Fran was shipped to Germany. That was in 1953 at the



Fran DeLage, 76, had a heart transplant in 1999. He has been making it his mission to speak out about the importance of organ donation ever since. (Your Smithfield Magazine photo by Laurence J. Sasso, Jr.)

height of the conflict. When his tour of duty ended he returned home and took up the career of a printing pressman.

But in 1989, the inevitable happened.

At age 58, Fran began to struggle. His heart was shutting down, leaving him without strength, forcing him to retire. The cardiologists at Rhode Island Hospital told him point blank that his heart was beyond repair and that any surgical attempt to effect a miracle would be fatal. They went on to say that his only hope was to undergo a heart transplant, a tricky procedure not done in Rhode Island; but candidly they added that he was an unlikely candidate because of his age.

Ironically, Fran's surname when translated to English means "of the old." To a visitor who sat across from him at a folding table in the educational wing of Greenville Baptist Church, he showed his Quebec-ian feistiness when he said, "I wanted to live up to my name! So, I went up to Boston to Brigham and Women's Hospital to look into getting another heart."

Thus began the race against time. Back and forth, up and down Interstate 95 Fran and his wife Ruth, drove; and doctors probed every inch of his body to determine whether or not he were a bona fide recipient of a donated heart. After all, at age 58, he was beyond the set parameters. Yet all of the tests showed that he

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Aoife Blais is almost two and delightfully acts the part. Open heart surgery saved her from a potentially fatal cardiac defect.

was in top condition. But one final test remained.

After answering a lot of questions put to him by a psychologist, Fran's French background surfaced and he put a question to the doctor: "Look, suppose you had to choose between an operation or the cemetery, which one would you pick?"

The psychologist answered, "You're ready."

It was to be the beginning of a long wait. For years he was in and out of the hospital with symptoms of his weakening condition. Fran had been given a beeper that had to be with him at all times; for, when a donated heart became available, the beeper would sound. Then he had but a three-hour window to get to Brigham and Women's. Years, months, days, and weeks passed, and he was getting weaker. All the while, he was troubled by the awful truth that for him to live on, someone out there had to die.

Finally, one day, just as Fran and Ruth were about to sit at their friends' table for a chicken dinner, his beeper sounded. "Put that food in the freezer," he said. "I'll be back soon to eat it."

The operation took place on the eleventh day of the eleventh month in the year 1999. Being an Army vet, Fran grasped the symbolic significance of the date. His battle would cease one way or the other on the 81st observance of the end of World War I. Moreover, the start of a new millennium was imminent. To Fran these were omens of a new life ahead for him.

His prescience was right. Before the transplantation, one

Continued on next page

Unforgettable moments



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Hearts full of love, Heidi and Brian Blais share a family moment with daughters Aoife (on Heidi's lap) and Aemilia. Aoife was born with a cardiac ailment that required open heart surgery soon after her birth. After a harrowing period of waiting, the six hour operation was successfully performed at Boston's Children's Hospital.

Continued from previous page

of his daughters and he had planned a way to communicate as he regained consciousness in the recovery room. She would give a thumb-up signal were the operation successful, and he would do likewise were he feeling OK.

"I remember seeing the overhead light and thinking, 'I'm still here.' I saw my daughter, and she had her thumb up. But I was so bundled in blankets that I couldn't give her the signal. It was very frustrating not to be able to communicate."

Twelve days after this miraculous surgery, Fran went home. As he walked from the hospital to the car, he was overwhelmed with joy. "To smell the air and to hear the traffic and to see the sky, I tell you I was filled with joy," Fran exclaims. On the drive home he had a question in mind: "Oh, God, why me?"

He is now 76 years old, knowing that the life expectancy of a transplanted heart is ten years, although today, because of new medicines, it's increased to sixteen years (daily, Fran ingests 14 pills). "It's now pay-back time," he says. "When you're close to death, you'll do anything. In my case, I've become very caring for people."

Fran has a mission. Not only does he often speak to groups about the urgency to become organ donors but also he shows up for volunteer work every day at the Greenville Baptist Church to fix an ornery door or whatever. The day he talked with a visitor, he had just replaced all the old thermostats with state-of-the-art digital ones ("Now I don't have to come here in the middle of the night when it's freezing cold to turn up those old things").

Fran, at about 5'3", stands taller than a lot of his neighbors. No way is he taking for granted the getting of a new heart. "In church," he says, "from time to time I talk with the kids and tell them this and that, trying to encourage them to love life." And on or about November 11, to observe the anniversary of that life-saving surgery, he sings solo to the congregation the old hymn, *My Tribute*:

*How can I say thanks for the things
You have done for me?
Things so undeserved, Yet You gave to
prove your love for me;
The voices of a million angels could
not express my gratitude.
All that I am, and every hope to be,
I owe it all to Thee.*

Across town, in the Spragueville section, lives the Blais family – Heidi and

Brian and their daughters Aemilia and Aoife. Mother and father, who used to perform with Irish folk groups, explain why the girls have Gaelic names. In translation "Aemilia" means "admiring" and Aoife (pronounced Eee-fa) means "radiant." Two weeks after birth, Aoife underwent open heart surgery at Boston Children's Hospital.

Her first few days home, Aoife seemed a perfect baby – good color and all. Best of all, she liked to sleep. At her one-week checkup, however, the pediatrician detected a heart murmur and recommended that she be examined by a pediatric cardiologist. Disbelieving that anything could be seriously wrong with their newborn daughter, they nonetheless followed through. On March 7, 2006 – ten days after Aoife was born – Brian and Heidi learned that she needed open heart surgery immediately. She would not live much longer otherwise.

Tests showed that Aoife was born with a congenital heart defect called *Truncus Arteriosus*, a condition that makes up only one percent of all cases of congenital heart disease. In the simplest of terms, when the heart of a fetus is developing, the aorta and the pulmonary artery are one and they divide into two separate arteries. But when they do not divide, the body is not supplied with the normal amount of oxygen. In a word, *Truncus Arteriosus* is fatal.

"We began living a nightmare," Heidi whispers. "The waiting was horrible. We waited for the doctor to call, for the hospital to call. We watched Aoife get sleepier and sleepier, having to wake her every five hours so that she could feed. Her skin began to sag because she was losing weight. It was difficult to get through a day, so frightening!"

Brian and Heidi summoned a priest at St. Philip Church. He came to their home on Indian Run Trail and baptized Aoife. Although the cardiologist was optimistic, Heidi expected the worst.

Finally the calls came, and on March 14 baby Aoife's tiny heart was mended in the OR of Boston Children's Hospital – a six or more hour procedure.

A couple of weeks ago Heidi and Mark had invited a visitor for dinner in order to see Aoife and hear the story of the family's ordeal. Aoife, now twenty-three months old, kept her sister, Aemilia, and the adults on their toes as she pranced about. Her blonde hair glistens, her eyes flash, her cheeks are full. She cleaned her plate of penne and chicken well before the rest of us.

Fran tells his story because he wants to

make people aware of the importance of organ donations. More than that, he wants to inspire us, especially the young, to love life and to live it vigorously and unselfishly.

Heidi tells her story because she wants to make mothers and fathers of heart-defected babies aware of an invaluable support group called "Helping Hands, Healing Hearts." Its web address is www.riheartgroup.com.

There are two hearts beating today in Smithfield that, were it not for the marvels of medical science, would not be. Beyond medical science, however, other factors show through these stories: love, hope, and faith, all of which poets believe originate in the heart. Be that as it may, Fran DeLage, with song and service, and Aoife Blais, with bounce and an appetite for penned and chicken, give to us a reverence for life.

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