

At the Heart of the Matter

Alumna learns that concerned friends are priceless — and indispensable — in saving her husband's life.

BY ELLEN BLUM BARISH

This e-mail is not meant to alarm you, but we want to share a concern with you about your husband.

When I received this ominous message a year ago from Hank, a friend and member of my husband's bicycle club, my heart started to pound. He wrote that my husband, David Barish (C80), "wasn't himself as a rider." After a snack or meal, Hank wrote, David had "a difficult time keeping up his usual moderately fast pace," and in spite of many club members' urgings to see a doctor, David had "shrugged it off." Hank ended by saying, "If he gets mad at me for sending this, too bad. We care about him. ..."

It took this e-mail and a community of concerned people — most of them fellow Northwestern alumni — to rescue my husband from an untimely demise last year.

His bicycle buddies saw the first signs. When you ride every week with the same merry band of cyclists, you get to know one another's abilities (and limitations). David was known as a fit, athletic and competitive fellow who tended to let discomfort — and annual physicals — fall by the wayside.

Then came Hank's e-mail. A wife has several options at a moment like this, especially if she's been sensing that things haven't been right for a long while. Rather than resort to theatrics, I printed the e-mail and laid it on his bedside table. To my relief, the next day David made a doctor's appointment.

The diagnosis: type 2 diabetes. David's fluctuating blood sugar level was contributing to his sluggishness.

But the story doesn't end there. After taking medication for six months, David still couldn't keep pace with me on a walk around the neighborhood. So on a recommendation from Merle, a bike club member who happened to be a diabetes educator, I made an appointment for David to see an endocrinologist.

The endocrinologist, Lisa Purdy (GFSM96), took his full medical history, or so she thought. As he was about to leave her office, David confessed that he had trouble breathing while walking. Two days later, an angiogram showed that my 47-year-old husband had five arterial blockages. He would not be allowed to leave the hospital until after bypass surgery.

The day I heard that David would need surgery was one of the worst in my life. For David, it was *the* worst day. But that's the moment when our alumni friends gathered close. Calls and e-mails poured in from Becky Uchitelle Harris (C81) and David Harris (WCAS80), Douglas Niehaus (McC80), Mark Dunn (McC81), Harry Kirsch (McC79, KSM80) and so many others. Mary Ellen Sullivan (GJ82) brought baseball and jazz magazines. When Northwestern alumni buddies Katherine Houston (J81), Steven Russek (McC81) and Ray Bandziulis (WCAS80) drove in from out of state to keep David company, their mere presence added liveliness and even a sense of celebration.

The circle of care was completed when we learned that Todd Rosengart (FSM81, FSM83) would perform the surgery. Todd and David had been friends in college but hadn't seen one another in more than 20 years. Now this old friend was going to take David's heart in his hands.

After the procedure — excruciatingly long but successful on all counts — David asked Todd to sign the purple heart-shaped pillow that postsurgery patients use to cushion their coughs. He wrote, "Strange reunion, Todd."

David returned to work three weeks later and was back on his bike within two months. He's now spinning, biking, coaching soccer and throwing a fast Frisbee.

Sure, you could argue that David is blessed with good friends and good health coverage. But this doesn't tell the whole story. It took a few folks sticking their necks out to heal a man who was an expert in denial.

Recently, David e-mailed those who had reached out to him during his medical ordeal. He wrote: *What have I taken from all of this? I cannot ignore reality or lie to myself. As a bike rider I know that it's better to see the signs early telling you that you are on the wrong road rather than discover it after*

riding miles in the dark. ... My heart has been touched by a fine surgeon, the support of my family and the magnitude of your care. With gratitude, David.

David's blood vessels are now open and clear, and so are his eyes. I just hope he keeps looking.

Ellen Blum Barish (C81, GJ84) is editor of Medill magazine, a syndicated columnist and a former adjunct writing instructor at the Writing Program.

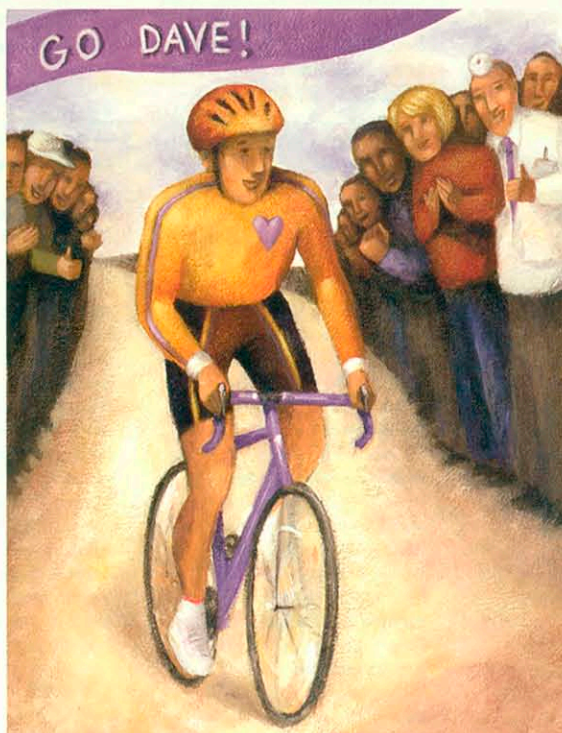


Illustration by Janet Atkinson