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News Release

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Heart Attack Spurs Fitness Commitment

A week before Christmas in 2004 Joann Knauer was in the grocery store with her sister when she had to go sit in the car. “My legs didn’t want to go,” she remembers. “My sister drove me home. When I went to put my groceries away, I couldn’t raise my arms.”

Later that evening, Knauer, who lives in East New Market, told her husband that she wasn’t feeling well. She had been taking her blood pressure throughout the day and saw that her normally low pressure was steadily increasing. Her husband took her to the emergency room at Dorchester General Hospital. “When the nurse saw me, she said, ‘You need a doctor,’” Knauer remembers. Soon after her arrival, she heard the overhead public address system announce that there was a “code blue” in the ER. “I knew that was for me.”

Cardiologist Robert Hanna, MD, who took on Knauer’s case, explained that she had experienced a myocardial infarction (MI) or a heart attack in lay person’s language. Dr. Hanna told Knauer and her husband that she was going to have to spend the night at the hospital. She says, “I told

him I needed to get home to do my Christmas baking. He told me ‘We’re going to have a pajama party here instead.’”

Her heart attack came as a surprise. Knauer had been diligent about going for an annual physical. She had none of the normal warning signs of heart disease - her blood pressure was low; her cholesterol was within normal range. She did have pain from arthritis and was being treated by rheumatologist Edmund McLaughlin, MD, for CREST syndrome, a type of scleroderma that affects the skin and blood vessels. In severe cases, the disease can damage the lungs, digestive tract, and heart. She says that the syndrome slowly cut off the blood vessels to her heart, contributing to her MI.

After being released from the hospital, Knauer had a heart catheterization and a nuclear stress test at The Memorial Hospital at Easton. The next time she visited Dr. Hanna in his office he recommended that she enroll in the Shore Health System cardiac rehabilitation program. She made her first visit to the Dorchester General Hospital Cardio-Pulmonary Fitness and Wellness Center in February of 2005 and became a regular three days a week.

“I love it,” Knauer says. “It makes me feel so good. Everybody who comes is in the same boat. We are all working to be healthy people.” She adds that the social aspect of going to cardiac rehab is as therapeutic as the exercise. Four other women from her Cambridge High School graduating class are now in the cardiac rehab program with her.

Cardiac rehab takes place under the medical direction of cardiologist Christadoss Rajasingh, MD. The clinical team consists of physicians, nurses, an exercise physiologist, dietitians, therapists, pharmacists, social workers, and educators. They work closely with referring physicians to coordinate all aspects of an individual's medical needs, including smoking cessation, diabetes counseling, and medication review.

Knauer's exercise routine consists of 20 minutes on the UBE/crank, a seated upper body exerciser that she calls the "hateful handlebars." She then progresses to the treadmill to increase her cardiovascular stamina and build leg muscle, the Aerodyne bike, and finishes with the NuStep, which provides a full body workout by pumping the legs while moving the arms. On her four days "off" from the hospital's program, Knauer rides her stationery bike at home.

In addition to her regular exercise routine, Knauer has taken to heart the nutrition advice she has received from the cardiac rehab staff. By watching her fat and sodium she says, "I get the idea of what I should eat and I have lost weight."

In January, the 71-year-old Knauer was voted Client of the Month by the staff at the Dorchester General Hospital Cardio-Pulmonary Fitness and Wellness Center. She accepted the honor and the free month of cardiac rehab that comes with it. Next to her photo on the center's bulletin board, her nomination form congratulates the enthusiastic Knauer for two years of consistent participation and for sticking with her goal: "To be the most healthy physically and mentally that I can be for an old lady."

Despite her insistence that she is beyond her prime, Knauer is a role model for people of all ages. She credits program manager Marybeth Daniels, RN, and her Dorchester General Hospital team members Melissa Eigenbrode, RN, RRT and Mary Beth Linthicum, RN, RRT, CPFT for their knowledge and encouragement. “They all know why we are here and give us advice when we have questions,” Knauer says. “I can talk to them about anything.”

Prior to her heart attack, she admits that she never exercised. She says, “Doctors should recommend this program to people when they are in their 30s and 40s. That way they won’t have to be in the shape I’m in.”

Knauer says that two years after her heart attack she is seeing Dr. Hanna and her other physicians less often. She has experienced an increased activity level and rarely takes medication for arthritis. “I walk, shop, work out in the yard, and do things with my family,” she explains. She adds that last year she and her husband celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary with a trip to New Mexico.

“Years ago I used to walk a mile a day and it really helped me,” she remembers. “Then I didn’t feel like doing it anymore so I didn’t. Now I have something that I really like to do with nice people who are all there for the same reason. That makes a big difference – I know I wouldn’t do it if I had to do it by myself.”

For more information about the Shore Health System Centers for Cardio-Pulmonary Fitness and Wellness, call Memorial Hospital at 410-822-1000, ext. 5208, or Dorchester General Hospital at 410-228-5511, ext. 8201. Visit online at www.shorehealth.org/services/cardiac.shtml.

Cutlines:

Joanne Knauer of East New Market begins her exercise routine at the Dorchester General Hospital cardiac rehab center with 20 minutes on the UBE/crank for an upper body workout. (Knauer UBEcrank DGH 011707.jpg)

Mary Beth Linthicum, RN, RRT, CPFT, a nurse and respiratory therapist specializing in cardio-pulmonary rehabilitation at Dorchester General Hospital (left), answers a question for Client of the Month Joann Knauer. (Linthicum Knauer treadmill 011707.jpg)

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