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“Everything Went Dark”

No Signs, No Symptoms: One Man's Story of Surviving the 'Widow-maker'

Kevin Wilson, 65, had prioritized exercise and staying in shape since he was a kid in Evansville, Indiana. He worked out every day but Sunday, played competitive tennis a few times a week, and occasionally hooped it with his son in pickup basketball games.

Kevin and Deb, his wife, are the parents of three children: two daughters and a son. Deb's a registered nurse and healthcare executive, so their family knows about the benefits of healthy living through regular exercise, healthy eating, and annual physicals and preventive health exams.

In fact, Kevin's most recent annual physical and lab workup revealed him to be in tip-top shape: no medical conditions, no abnormal lab values, and no need for any medication.

But that was all before Dec. 30, the day Kevin suffered a heart attack while playing basketball at a local church with his son.

Thanks to the quick thinking of those around him and the skill of first responders, his cardiologist, cardiothoracic surgeon and his heart care team, Kevin survived to share his harrowing medical story.

“Everything went dark”

“I didn't have any symptoms before it all happened. I didn't have any chest pain or labored breathing,” he recalls. “As I was running back up the court, I suddenly stopped. I broke into a profuse cold sweat and began to feel sick to my stomach. I wondered, ‘What is going on?’ I felt wobbly and saw the lights dim, and everything went dark.

“When I regained consciousness, I was lying on the basketball court floor with people all around asking me questions, trying to get me to respond.”

Kevin had collapsed unconscious on the court. Fortunately, a fellow player—a registered nurse—rushed over to Kevin. He found Kevin had no pulse and began cardiopulmonary resuscitation. Meanwhile, the church security guard called 911 while another teammate—a radiologist—asked if an automated external defibrillator (AED) was anywhere on the premises. One of the players was the basketball coach. He knew where the AED was and ran to get it.

After one shock from the defibrillator, Kevin began to regain consciousness but was extremely disoriented.

“I was struggling to come back to life and lurching, grabbing onto my son. Basically, I was trying to live, I think,” he says. “They were asking me questions. The oddest thing was I could hear them, and my brain was functioning, but I couldn’t answer or get any words out for a while.”

What happened to Kevin?

Kevin had experienced the deadliest of all heart attack types—the notorious “widow-maker,” as it’s informally called. According to the Cleveland Clinic, a widow-maker heart attack occurs when the left anterior descending (LAD) artery, the largest of the three arteries that provide blood to the heart, is 80 percent to 100 percent blocked.

Only 12 percent of all people who experience a widow-maker heart attack outside a hospital or advanced care facility survive, reports the American Heart Association.

After emergency service and fire department personnel arrived at the church, paramedics stabilized Kevin and transported him to Gulf Coast Medical Center - Trauma and Emergency Center.

Cardiac catheterization testing revealed Kevin had five blocked coronary arteries, four of which were 90 percent to 100 percent blocked, including the LAD, the artery likely responsible for causing the life-threatening heart attack.

Kevin recalls Dr. Nemalan Selvaraj, a board-certified interventional cardiologist with Lee Physician Group Cardiology, telling him, “Kevin, not only do you have guardian angels, but you were a walking, ticking time bomb.”

“Wait a minute, are you sure you have the right file?” Kevin asked Dr. Selvaraj. “Surely that can’t be me.”

The massive heart attack initially seemed hardly possible given his active lifestyle and lack of symptoms. To be so healthy on the outside but have such advanced and life-threatening heart disease?

Dr. Selvaraj gently assured him. “Oh, no, it’s the right file, Kevin.”

Kevin says, “I would be the last guy anyone would think would have four blocked arteries. Our whole family was shocked.”

Restorative surgery & cardiac rehab

After being stabilized in the emergency center, Kevin was transferred to HealthPark Medical Center, where on Jan. 3, he underwent a quadruple coronary artery bypass grafting (CABG) surgery to restore normal blood flow to his heart.

Cardiothoracic surgeon Dr. Michael DeFrain performed the surgery, which involved taking veins from Kevin’s leg to create bypass grafts around the blockages in his coronary arteries. The complex open-heart procedure took several hours but was a success.

Seventy-two hours after surgery, Kevin was discharged. After a few weeks of recovery at home, Kevin was cleared by his surgeon and cardiologist to enter Lee Health’s outpatient cardiac rehabilitation program at Lee Health Coconut Point.

Kevin attends three 45-minute cardiac rehabilitation sessions weekly. His heart function is carefully monitored while he exercises under full medical supervision. His care team includes doctors, nurses, exercise physiologists, and a dietitian. The all-encompassing program of 36 sessions focuses on weight training, cardio, and heart health and nutrition education.

Kevin, an investment banker who works from home, also plays classical trumpet with the Evansville Philharmonic in Indiana. He’s hoping

to be healthy enough to perform in a concert for kids in mid-March, maybe even play in the Pops concert series.

A 'second birthday'

Kevin calls Dec. 30 "my second birthday because it's the day I went away and came back." He credits his Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, for putting the right people in place during his cardiac event and recovery. He feels blessed, grateful and very thankful to be alive in 2024.

"I haven't seen the security video yet, but the security guard at the church has, and he said it was like a training video on what to do. You would have thought this team practiced this regimen," Kevin says about the nurse, doctor, and church security guard.

"I would hope that people will be very serious when it comes to their health and do the right things with annual exams and preventive screens," Kevin adds. "If you have an opportunity, become CPR certified. I encourage you to do that. If you can learn how an AED works, do that, too, and know where the AEDs are located, wherever you are."

Deb couldn't agree more with Kevin. "There are many other details displaying the grace of God and the importance of CPR and AED in the field; otherwise, we may not have the same miraculous story."



About
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Kevin Wilson is a Principal with The DAK Group, an investment bank specializing in middle-market, privately held companies. Kevin advises business owners on sell-side and buy-side transactions, financial restructuring, capital advisory and valuations.