



Life with a Ventricular Assist Device

Meet John Klonowski

"Heart failure was bringing me down quite a bit," he recalled. "I slept all the time. My feet were swollen and I couldn't walk more than a few steps."

John and Emelia will soon be celebrating their 31st wedding anniversary.

When John Klonowski's active life became a constant struggle to do even the simplest things, he knew it was time to get help.

This was especially frustrating for John, a bicycle enthusiast and mountain hiker who loved to travel with his wife Emelia.

"He absolutely had no quality of life left before the VAD implant. Life is precious and John was given a second chance at living it." – Emelia

Heart failure is a chronic and degenerative condition in which the heart has a hard time pumping blood through the body. When this happens, the person feels weakness and fatigue, shortness of breath and other debilitating symptoms. If left untreated, heart failure is life-threatening and may require hospitalization.

When he was admitted to the Stony Brook University Hospital Emergency Department, John's health was fading fast. He became a patient of Hal Skopicki, MD, PhD, Chief of Cardiology at Stony Brook University Heart Institute; Director, Heart Failure and Cardiomyopathy Center and Medical Director of the VAD (Ventricular Assist Device) Program, and Allison McLarty, MD, Surgical Director of the VAD Program at Stony Brook Heart Institute.

They decided that John needed a VAD, a battery-powered mechanical pump attached to the heart. A VAD helps the failing heart's left ventricle do its job of pumping blood. Open-heart surgery is needed to implant the device. A VAD can be used as a temporary measure (for instance, prior to a heart transplant) or as lifelong support for older individuals or for those who are not eligible for transplantation. These devices can dramatically improve quality of life and reduce symptoms. Stony Brook was the first hospital on Long Island to implant a VAD device in 2010 and is the only program on Long Island to be continuously certified by The Joint Commission since 2011.

A testament to the high-quality care of our patients, Stony Brook's VAD program is the only on Long Island to be continuously certified by The Joint Commission since 2011.

John and Emelia had many questions, not only about the VAD but also about John's future. Both doctors and the VAD coordinators (Ellen, Peter and Jill) were "the greatest support team," John said.

"Dr. Skopicki is compassionate and brilliant. He cares," said Emelia. "He sat with us for hours" and answered all of our questions.

John recalled Dr. McLarty, who performed his VAD implant, showing him the device before surgery so he could understand how it worked. She connected him with other people who were living with VADs. And during his journey back to health, "one procedure I had, Dr. McLarty was there, and she actually held my hand," John said. Dr. McLarty was there for John and his wife every day while John was recovering from surgery. "She truly exemplifies the meaning of the word Doctor; she's an exceptional surgeon and her caring and compassion touched us deeply," Emelia said.

"John was getting progressively sicker," said Dr. Skopicki. "We've been able to treat him so that he can have a much better quality of life and get back to being the person he wants to be – for himself and his loved ones."

Dr. McLarty said, "When patients hear that they have to have a device implanted, it's understandable that they may feel anxious or have concerns. We let them know that they're in capable hands with our VAD team."

His experience at Stony Brook University Hospital was "spectacular," said John. "The nurses, all the staff and everyone I interacted with were so friendly and concerned," he recalled. "Everyone at Stony Brook was so nice and professional," said Emelia.

Every six weeks, John has a cardiology follow-up. Because he and Emelia live in Hampton Bays, he goes to Stony Brook Southampton Hospital for his appointments. "So that's been great. I don't have to travel," he said.

Now John is living a full life again. He goes to the gym to work off all the gourmet cooking he's been doing for the frequent dinners he and Emelia host at their home. The couple will celebrate their 31st wedding anniversary soon. And they're planning a trip to New England.

"The best thing for me is to see him breathe normally and live life," Emelia said. "He was dying. He absolutely had no quality of life left before the VAD implant. Life is precious and John was given a second chance at living it."