

George Smith

Savoring the priceless gift of life

When I agreed to meet with my life insurance agent in a nearby coffee shop to update my policies several years ago, I never expected to walk away from the experience thanking God for the simple blessings in my life I had previously taken for granted. But that's precisely what transpired after I spent an hour or so in the company of MetLife Financial Services Representative George W. Smith.

Enough moons have now passed that I can confess it was a meeting I'd been dreading – not because I didn't like George but because I was ashamed that my career had taken a major nosedive since I'd last seen him.

The last time we'd met, it was in the spacious office I maintained as the founding Editor & Publisher of *Saratoga Living* magazine. I'd recently completed interviews with Andy Rooney and David Hyde Pierce and my biggest problem was deciding what to wear to a forthcoming gala being hosted by Marylou Whitney.

A bronzed, beaming and brawny George had pulled into the parking area in front of my office on a spiffy purple motorcycle. We'd exchanged pleasantries, then taken care of whatever business needed to be taken of before he hopped back on his Harley and I made a beeline back to my computer desk.

I'd subsequently sold my beloved regional periodical -- and with it much of my identity and sense of purpose. By the time George called me again, I was no longer Ann Hauprich, prestigious magazine owner, but Ann Hauprich, struggling freelance writer.

Although I knew I wasn't in a position to afford to "beef up" my life insurance premiums much less to supplement them with other policies, I somehow felt compelled to sit down with George – if only as a professional courtesy to the person who would play a role in making sure my children were "covered" in the event of my untimely demise.

Eager to avoid questions about how my career was going, I nonchalantly asked George if he'd taken any exciting motorcycle trips since I'd last waved good-bye to him.

Eyes twinkling, he responded: "Actually, motorcycling was one of the activities I had to give up after my brain surgery."

Brain surgery? What brain surgery?



Motorcycle enthusiast George Smith of Menands, NY on vacation in Daytona prior to his life transforming illness and brain surgery in 2005 and relaxing with wife Geri in front of their boat on the scenic shores of Lake George a year later. George credits the support and he received from Geri and their three children as well as from good friends with aiding in his recovery at St. Peter's Hospital and during his stay at Sunnyview Rehabilitation Center. George later returned to the Schenectady, NY rehab facility as a caring volunteer.



My own brain could not immediately process the information it was being fed. “You had brain surgery?” I finally blurted out. “I’m so sorry. I had no idea. If I had known, I’d have . . . “

I’d have . . . what? So mortified was I to learn that George had been in the hospital and I had not sent as much as a single get well card that I was tripping over my words of shame and regret.

“Hey, don’t worry about it,” he was saying. “There was no way you could have known. And anyway, I’m much better now. For a while there, they were afraid I might never walk again or have use of the left side of my body.”

Huh? Surely my ears were playing tricks on me. It was definitely time to ask George to hit the REWIND button and repeat what I thought he had just said.

“Yes, that’s right. I was in a wheelchair for quite a long time after the surgery and even after I was discharged from Sunnyview. Walking is definitely something I no longer take for granted.”

Hold the phone. Did he say he’d been a patient at Sunnyview? The only Sunnyview I’d ever heard of was a rehabilitation center in Schenectady, NY where patients were sent in the aftermath of severe strokes, motor vehicle accidents and traumatic brain injuries.

I just had to know the whole story. The 5 Ws: Who? What? Why? Where? When? – and – most importantly . . . How? It turned out that George, who had led what most would call a charmed life since his birth in 1956, was having coffee with a client at a Starbucks in Albany, NY on January 6, 2005 when he suddenly began to feel a tremendous amount of pressure in his head. “At first I thought was that I was having a stroke, but ironically, the pain that had filled my entire skull began to subside and so I decided to drive myself to Albany Memorial Hospital – which was about 10 minutes from the Starbucks.”

Upon reporting to those in the ER that the left side of his body “was not cooperating” as it should, George was seen by a specialist who ordered a series of tests including CT scans that led to a diagnosis of “some sort of a brain lesion.” From there George was referred to a team of specialists – all of whom believed his symptoms were linked to a brain tumor. George made arrangements for his mother – who had been residing with him since suffering a stroke in 1998 – to go to live with his brother in Georgia and then prepared as best he could for a biopsy of his brain to be performed. As the date of the biopsy neared, George began losing more and more function on his left side until he was “literally holding onto walls and dragging my left leg when I walked.”

When the morning of January 26, 2005 dawned, George says he “just kind of collapsed.” Fortunately, his beloved wife Geri, whom he wed in 1976, wasted no time summoning an ambulance — which whisked George from their home in Menands, NY to St. Peter’s Hospital in Albany. A CT scan revealed that what was believed to be a tumor had quadrupled in size in just three weeks. Because the brain doesn’t have many pain receptors, there had been no headaches while a monstrous mass was growing inside of George’s head. But doctors soon discovered that the right side of his brain had moved over to accommodate the growing mass. Emergency surgery ensued.



Hours later Geri and the couple's three children, Alex, Adrienne and Alison — who then ranged in age from 28 to 20 — were told the prognosis for George's recovery was bleak.

There had been no tumor on his brain; rather he'd been suffering from an infection that the neurosurgeons had to irrigate before stitching George's skull back together. The brain infection would require mega doses of antibiotics that would need to be administered intravenously over a prolonged period.

"Telling you about this now, it's as if I'm sharing someone else's story because I was really out of it in ICU for about a week after the brain surgery, but this is what I've been told," explains George. "It's still hard to believe even now, but I was basically in a vegetative state for quite a while post-op."

My eyes widened in disbelief as George continued relating his saga. Up until this point I had known him only as an insurance company representative who had been presented with a variety of MetLife leadership citations as well as the corporation's Presidential Consumer Service Award. I also knew he liked to unwind on weekends with his family by Alpine skiing in the winter and boating and camping during the warmer weather.

Being active year-round in the great outdoors was important to George; being able to commute to and from meetings with MetLife clients on his motorcycle was an added perk.

What I did not realize until I took the time to ask questions and listen more intently to answers on this and subsequent occasions was that my insurance man had been honored as "Citizen of the Year" by his community's Rotary Club in recognition of longstanding and distinguished volunteer efforts as a member of the Menands Board of Education and as a member of the Menands Fire Company.

George had served as President of the Board of Education for eight of the 15 years he represented the BOE. He'd also held the office of President and Fire Chief of the Menands Fire Company for 11 of the 25 years he'd been an active member as of 2005. This was in addition to putting in an average of 50 hours a week meeting with clients to provide them with confidential and comprehensive financial strategies regarding their individual insurance, wealth accumulation and retirement needs.

"Ironically, my focus included not only life insurance, annuities and mutual funds, but also auto and home insurance, disability income insurance and long-term care insurance. Guess which ones I'd not considered priorities in my own life until I found myself needing them?"

And need them he did! Flat on his back in ICU with tubes attached here, there and everywhere to minimize pain and ensure that swelling and pressure issues were kept under control, George was initially oblivious to the crisis situation. Early on he had required infusions of eight bags of antibiotics a day through a pick-line to help him recover from the infection that had invaded and assaulted his brain.

"It really was a blessing in disguise that I was so out-of-it post-op," he smiles. "One of the first things I remember when I finally came to was that I had absolutely no movement on my left side and very little strength on my right side. It was kind of scary to be so helpless – especially when nobody could promise that things would ever get better."

Luckily words like *can't*, *hopeless* and *self-pity* were **not** in George's vocabulary. Following a three-week hospital stay, George was transferred directly to Sunnyview Rehabilitation Center. "It's amazing how your perspective changes when you go from being able to do everything without even thinking about it to needing assistance with such basic things as feeding and bathing yourself," says George who lost 30 pounds during the two and a half months that followed his surgery.

"Looking back, it's hard to believe, but I was really excited the first time I was propped up in a wheelchair after my surgery. I still couldn't sit up on my own a week after the operation, but it felt good just to be able to look at things from an angle other than flat on my back. Gradually, I regained enough strength on my right side that I could steady myself in a wheelchair, but whether I'd ever be able to get out of it and walk on my own was not a question the doctors could answer at the time I was transferred to Sunnyview. At that point, I was just so happy and grateful to be alive that I didn't dwell on the possibility of life in a wheelchair as much as you might think. It was initially more like *I'll accept what's left and make the best of it.*"

That was to change shortly after his arrival at Sunnyview when an "extra special and caring nurse" named Tamara, a speech therapist "with the patience of a saint" named Melissa and a physical therapist named Valerie (whom he affectionately refers to as his "drill sergeant") entered his life. "They had very different styles, but each one helped me in a very important way. With Valerie, it was along the lines of *If it hurts, we'll get you a belt to bite on.* Of course, she didn't actually say that. In fact, Valerie always told me what we needed to do in a nice way, but there was never any question that you would do what you were told until she said you were done. That's why she reminded me of a drill sergeant."



Visions of boating on Lake George with wife Geri helped keep George motivated in rehab.

Tamara, he says, showed a softer side, finding time to talk with him as she made her rounds while Melissa won his admiration and respect for the manner in which she interacted with those with such severe brain injuries that in George's eyes they appeared to be "adult infants."

Over a six-week period, George spent an average of six hours a day, seven days a week working hard not only at speech therapy (needed to re-boot his organizational skills) but also at physical and occupational therapy to strengthen his right side and to "try to get my left side to do what I wanted it to do."

The harder he worked, the more determined George became. He vowed to one day walk out of the rehabilitation center to reclaim the life he had known and loved, but had all too humanly taken for granted, before being stricken with the debilitating brain infection.

Prior to his homecoming on March 17, 2005, George had made what he describes as "slow, but steady progress" at Sunnyview. "After a month there, I could finally move the fingers on my left hand and also had some movement in my left leg. But when I say progress was generally slow, I mean that just. It wasn't as if I went from not being able to hold my hand up one day to being able to raise it in the air and wave the next. One day I could move my fingers one millimeter; the next day, I could move them two millimeters."

When prodded, George admits the rugged firefighter deep in his heart and soul ultimately motivated him to go "above and beyond" – sneaking in some do-it-yourself physiotherapy exercises after his scheduled sessions were over. "I guess at the end of the day I realized that if I truly wanted to reclaim what had been taken from me by the brain infection, I'd have to fight to get it back. Nobody could do it for me," reflects George.

Two weeks prior to his St. Patrick's Day release date George was still being infused with eight bags of antibiotics daily to counter the infection that was so virulent that Geri had to be trained to continue administering multiple bags of antibiotics to her husband using a pick-line long after his return home. Geri also had to learn many other home health care skills – including how to transfer her once strapping spouse from his wheelchair to his a bed.

One of the happiest days in George's post-op life was the one when he was able to walk 40 or 50 feet using a hemi-walker before needing to sit back down in his wheelchair. "You learn how to get along with one arm and one leg," he says.

Through continued physiotherapy sessions at home, George gradually regained sufficient use of his left side to be able to return to work in the summer of 2005 and was also soon boating with his family. He quickly realized, however, that motorcycling was a passion he'd have to give up because his balance was too unstable. It soon became clear that the same applied to firefighting and skiing.

"I'm still a member of the fire department, but I haven't been active since 2005 because I don't do tall ladders anymore," says George, who now lists "snowmobiling" as his favorite winter sport.

"I made up my mind to focus on all the things I could still do rather than on the few that I could no longer do," explains George. Estimating he's now "95 per cent back to where I was before the day I first knew something was wrong at Starbucks in January of 2005," George insists the sun never rises on a new day without him pausing to give thanks for "the little things in life."

Learning in the summer of 2011 that his balance had improved to the degree that he could safely ride a motorcycle again if he so desired was cause for jubilation. Being able to commute to and from client visits on a new white Harley gives George a joyous feeling of freedom and independence that is beyond description.

If all of this were not enough to make you want to stand up and cheer, get this: As soon as he was strong enough to do so, George insisted on becoming a volunteer at Sunnyview so he could "give back" just a little bit of what he had received from Tamara, Melissa, Valerie and a holy host of others at the rehabilitation center. The thin, frail man who needed help getting around in a wheelchair within Sunnyview's corridors ultimately spent seven hours a day once a week for three years helping others do the same.

"I really enjoyed bringing patients in wheelchairs back and forth to physiotherapy sessions. I could relate to how they were feeling and I was happy to have an opportunity to do for them what others had once done for me."

Another thing George did as soon as he was well enough: He applied for long-term health care coverage through MetLife. "It's one of those things most people don't ever think they'll need, but by the time they need it, they can't get it. The same is true of disability insurance."

Although George owned a small policy covering the latter, the modest amount would have run out prematurely had his recovery dragged on much longer. In his words: "I'm lucky that I was given a chance because my family would have lost everything if I hadn't been able to return to work when I did."

I, for one, am thankful he was blessed with a full recovery, by George!



When you've got your health, you've got . . . EVERYTHING!

Snowmobiling with Geri now rates as George Smith's favorite winter activity. He also enjoys letting the good times roll in the company of great friends like Jim Barber, John Petrus and Ron Prior. Those wishing to arrange a confidential consultation with George about their insurance needs may email him at gsmith@metlife.com or give him a call at 518. 220.3044.

The harder he worked, the more determined George Smith became. He vowed to one day walk unaided out of the rehabilitation center. George's ultimate goal: to reclaim the life he had known and loved, but had all too humanly taken for granted, prior to being stricken with the debilitating brain infection in 2005.

