

Press Release

Thankful For Every Breath The Betty Hamby Story



Betty Hamby's spirited laugh and expressive eyes seem atypical for a person who struggles with chronic lung disease. Apart from a bit of raspiness in her voice, Betty seems like any other pleasant retiree. She does much of her own housework, likes to shop in craft stores, and create topiaries in her spare time. But this story of survival is truly remarkable. Her medical condition has made it necessary for her to be placed on a ventilator nine times in recent years.

Blue Ridge HealthCare's Respiratory Care Director John Flynt admires Betty's toughness. "Most people who have been on a ventilator that many times don't survive, or are so functionally debilitated that they have poor quality of life," said Flynt. "She has not only survived her ventilator care, but has been repeatedly successful in her rehabilitation."

One of Betty's long-time respiratory care practitioners, Duncan Murrow echoes Flynt's opinions. "Betty is a fighter," he said. "She always keeps such a good attitude. She's one of those people who keeps me in the profession – a real encouragement, no matter how sick she is."

Betty has indeed faced numerous battles with her health. Her problems started over a decade ago when she was diagnosed with emphysema, aggravated by smoking. Then two-and-a-half years ago complications related to a heart attack caused her to contract pneumonia, and be placed on a ventilator at a hospital in Winston-Salem.

"I remember the doctor saying that I wasn't going to live," Betty said. "He said I had the worst pneumonia you could have. When I did live, he told me not to thank him. He said 'the Man above is the one who brought you through this – it wasn't me.'"

Betty spent three weeks breathing on a ventilator. It was during this time that she met a dedicated respiratory therapist – the first of many she would come to trust with her life.

"I remember when he came in and said 'if we don't get her off this ventilator she's not coming off.' He got permission to work with me, and by gradually building up my strength, and teaching me to relax, he was able to help me breathe on my own."

Betty's daughter Gail Pennell remembers the uneasiness the family felt when the time came to take her mother off the ventilator. "It was such a fright for her to have to come off the machine. We really were wondering if she would be able to breathe on her own again."

However, after her initial successful recovery, Betty was continually plagued by recurring respiratory problems.

Gail said "In the last two-and-a-half years Mom's been in the hospital ten or eleven times – mostly for pneumonia or congestive heart failure that causes fluid to build up on her lungs. Many of those times she's had to be on the respirator – maybe just for a day or two."

Because of Betty's problems she now uses an assisted breathing device called a BiPAP. The device forces varying



Respiratory care practitioner, Duncan Murrow and Betty Hamby discuss the fitting on Betty's BiPAP assisted breathing unit.

pressures of oxygen-rich air into Betty's lungs while she sleeps, or during other times when she is having difficulty breathing.

Even though she experiences many difficulties, Betty's resilience and braveness impresses the respiratory care team at Blue Ridge HealthCare's Grace Hospital. Flynt said, "She can get around, go to yard sales, shop and participate in other activities. It's a great testimony to the success of her treatment plan that she is not confined to her home or bed."

Flynt explained that Betty's success is due in large part to a very well executed respiratory care plan, supervised by her physician, cardiologist Roger L. Seagle, MD. "She has survived because of great intensive care, restorative care and home care," said Flynt. "It's dependent on teamwork between the patient, the physician, and the respiratory therapists who facilitate the plan."

Betty has not only faced severe respiratory and heart conditions, but also breast cancer (an eleven-year survivor). It's hard to understand how she can have a positive attitude about life. How does she do it?

"I try not to think about my condition much," she says with a smile. "I'm just thankful to be alive. I wouldn't be here if it weren't for the respiratory care folks who have cared for me and become my friends. I guess I owe them my life."

In late October, Blue Ridge HealthCare celebrated the achievements of dedicated respiratory care professionals, like the ones who helped Betty, during National Respiratory Care Week. If you (or a friend) are suffering from breathing difficulties, consult your physician, or contact the Respiratory Care Department at Blue Ridge HealthCare, ph. 580-6580 or 879-7628.