

CHALLENGING ILLNESS EXPERIENCE—GREGORY PIERSON, SAN DIEGO AGAINST ALL ODDS

Gregory Pierson supports his wife, Elizabeth, through her life-threatening heart surgery and strengthens his relationship with her in the process.

As 1999 ended, challenges and obstacles came close to undoing my marriage. In July of that year, I was diagnosed with type II diabetes. In August, the dream I held of obtaining a master's degree in social work was dashed when the school refused to allow me to reenroll. We also struggled financially. Since my wife, Elizabeth, and I are both hypertensive, it made the pressures upon us worse.

In spite of all the problems, we had bright moments. In August, I was hired by a local courier company, which stabilized our financial situation. That same month I joined the SGI-USA San Diego's Men's Chorus. Elizabeth gained a promotion to supervisor in the housekeeping department of the Hyatt Islandia Hotel on Mission Bay where she's worked since March 1994. On Nov. 9, 1999, Elizabeth, originally from the Philippines, passed a comprehensive oral and written U.S. Citizenship exam in spite of the increased levels of stress.

However, our happiness over that accomplishment was short-lived.

While on break the night of Nov. 12, my wife suffered a sudden series of major ruptures of her ascending and descending aorta, the main blood passages that direct blood through her body. I was asleep, and word did not reach me until 1:00 the next morning. I rushed to be at her side.

When I saw Elizabeth hooked up to life support at Mission Bay Hospital, I began chanting. It was a situation I was not even prepared to face or accept. One of the attending doctors informed me that of all the cases like this she had treated, no one had survived. This was not what I wanted to hear, not even from a trained professional.

Elizabeth was transported to another hospital. I followed the ambulance to Scripps Hospital in La Jolla where her emergency aortic reconstruction surgery was performed. Before she even entered the ER's main hallway, a crowd of medical professionals swirled around her. Her chest was prepped and cut open as the cardiac surgeon explained to me what they were attempting to do. Seconds later, she was rushed into the cardiac operating suite.

As I said, Elizabeth was not given much chance of surviving the surgery, and a slimmer chance of recovery. The doctor told me that there would be complications regardless of the outcome. There was real concern voiced by the surgeon that Elizabeth may have suffered damage to her brain and other vital organs due to the lack of blood flow.

With the support of SGI-USA members and leaders, a determined chanting campaign was waged.

As Elizabeth fought for her life after the surgery, I chanted over her in the cardiac care unit with the encouragement of the doctors and nursing staff while she was in a drug-induced coma. As I watched her, it dawned on me that we had never had a real chance to share a life as husband and wife—our lives were in constant conflict and familial strife. I was determined that we would change this once and for all.

Elizabeth awoke from her coma on Nov. 24. She was disoriented and could not speak.

She gestured for a pen and paper. With her weak arms and hands, she wrote her first words: “What happened?” She was told. Her next written words were: “I want to go home.”

When her breathing tubes were removed she could only whisper, but she was able to chant and recite part of the sutra.

Days later she was moved to a private room. We continued to chant. Members continued to chant and visit her. The results were impressive.

By Dec. 11, she was walking on her own and eating solid food. I slept on the floor of her room refusing to leave her side. We were told she could be home by Christmas — she came home on Dec. 17. She was able to attend the New Year’s Day World Peace Gongyo meeting.

But things took a turn for the worse. At home one day she began to vomit, and doubled over in severe pain; her blood pressure was in the high 180s. On Jan. 3, she was back in the hospital diagnosed with a circulation problem to her kidneys.

At the advice of my leaders during a home visit, I put all of my personal pains and fears and need for change before the Gohonzon. It was so hard to do because I was now so tired and feeling depressed; focusing was becoming difficult. But I knew if something had to change in my environment to make things right, it had to begin with me.

It was discovered that Elizabeth’s left kidney had decreased blood flow. Yet in spite of her intense pain, we were assured that it was functioning normally. More medication was prescribed and Elizabeth was allowed to come home a week later.

From that moment on, I was determined to attend to her every need without complaint. As my wife gained weight from my cooking, I knew that we could overcome our problems if we chanted.

As the month of February dawned, Elizabeth was very excited about her upcoming citizenship ceremony on the 24th — a date she was determined not to miss. It was a very happy moment for us — the day she would become a United States Citizen.

However, on Feb. 25 she suffered another setback. Overnight her blood pressure had skyrocketed to an alarmingly high 205 over 85; she was having problems breathing. Even though she was on new medication, the pressure would not drop as it had in the past. She was back in the ICU.

After a quick examination, it was disclosed that her left kidney was close to failure and she had retained over two liters of fluid in her right lung cavity. Her pressure was 187 over 94; she was suffocating. One liter of fluid was drained. She was put on medication that brought her pressure under control. Her doctors conferred.

I began to chant in earnest. “How much more could she take?” I asked. There must be a reason for all of this turmoil. We had to overcome it. We had to fight. We had to win!!

The next morning a catheter was introduced into a vein in her thigh and guided toward her repaired aorta. Another catheterization procedure was performed to introduce a stainless steel wire mesh shunt into the left kidney’s repaired artery to open it from the two millimeters it was to the four millimeters it had to be to promote proper blood flow.

That procedure was successful. The kidney began to produce urine immediately and her pressure began to decrease.

My wife is now home and her blood pressure is still being controlled, but the amount of medication used is down by 94 percent.

As for my health, I was given a physical on March 3 at the VA Hospital. My blood pressure was high, so my medications were changed. My blood sugar level is now within

normal limits. I will not have to take pills or shots to control my diabetes.

Chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo turned the darkest moments of this entire nightmare—this horrible poison—into the sweetest medicine. Why do I say this? Because I believe that Elizabeth was protected by our Buddhist practice.

At the time of her collapse in the Hyatt's cafeteria that foggy night in November, a co-worker ran out to alert an ambulance crew that was on break in the Hyatt's parking lot. She was attended to in seconds. If she had collapsed in a room or in an elevator, she would have died.

In the three hours it took to get word to me of Elizabeth's brush with death, her fellow co-workers implored and demanded that life-saving interventions be started immediately by the paramedics. Thanks to the strong support of her friends and fellow workers, she was given a fighting chance.

Hyatt Islandia had taken great care to insure that she was covered for the duration of her rehabilitation by insuring that her disability paperwork was done before the ambulance left the parking lot. Although they were not obligated to do it, the Hyatt allowed Elizabeth to use her vacation and sick leave while her disability papers worked their way into the State's system. She started receiving all these benefits on Jan. 17.

Life in our home now is tranquil. During my visits to the hospital, it was as if Elizabeth and I got to know each other—really know each other—for the very first time.

Nichiren Daishonin wrote these profound words: "A man is like a pillar. A woman is like a crossbeam. A man is like the legs of a person, a woman like the trunk. A man is like the wings of a bird, a woman like the body. If the wings and the body become separated, then how can the bird fly? And if the pillar topples, then the crossbeam will surely fall to the ground"(*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 1043).

Thanks to the power of the Mystic Law, we all have the opportunity to change our karma and our life-condition during this lifetime. My appreciation for the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin and the guidance of President Ikeda is as boundless as the sky.

Our battles are not over, however, I know we will make it.