

Miracles Part II

Les was actually relieved with the diagnosis of silicosis because, he figured, at least it wasn't cancer. He believed he could live with the disease, going on to explain, "A person lives 10 to 15 years with silicosis, so that's not so bad. I figured at 10 to 15 years—or maybe longer on down the road, I'd really get bad [with shortness of breath]. It really didn't bother me.

"But see, mine [his particular type of silicosis] didn't take that long. Mine was at warp speed. Like Hawk's Nest."*

Les was slowly walking six miles a day in 1994, but the most important thing to him was that he could still go down to work in the mine. By July of 1995, he could barely go two miles. A doctor told him that if he quit mining at that time, he might have another 2 more years to live—Les' expectation of living another 10 to 15 years was now gone. His worsening shortness of breath forced him into an early retirement in November of 1995. Two years later, in the fall of 1997, he was having trouble just walking from the bedroom to the living room. He was spending most of his days in bed, wearing oxygen all the time.

When asked what his life was like then, what was going through his mind, he answered, "Well, I was just taking it a day at a time. It bothered me because I couldn't play with my kids. I couldn't go hunting with my son. I couldn't go out with my daughter. I stayed at home."

And how about his relationship with Linda? In their region it is customary for men go out to earn a living while a wife stays home. "It was a big let down. When I had to quit work everything just fell on her. She had to cut the grass, and go to work. And do everything around the house. It was hard to accept."

But even within the isolation and despair, Les would break another barrier by helping to create greater awareness of Black Lung Disease. In the spring of 1998 a major Kentucky newspaper published a series of highly acclaimed articles about Black Lung Disease. Les was featured in one of the stories, briefly touching upon his success in winning his battle with worker's compensation. The story also told about his painfully diminishing quality of life as he approached the final phase of a terminal disease.

December of 1999 came, and finally, with some good news. Les had been put on the list for a lung transplant! But the window of opportunity for lung transplants can sometimes be narrow, especially when the patient has a rapidly deteriorating condition as Les did. This is because the patient must be sick enough to require surgery, but be strong enough to survive the operation and to begin rehabilitation soon after.

Getting on the list was good news that gave Linda and Leslie hope. It also reinforced Linda's belief that God would provide. "I always felt at peace. I knew God was going to work some miracle. I didn't know what, but I never doubted Les would be OK." In a calm voice, in her slow drawl, Linda, rock steady, says, "There was never a doubt in my mind."

As part of a regular monthly routine, Linda and Les drove over 200 miles from Logan to Morgantown, to keep appointments with his pulmonary physician, Dr. Daniel Banks. Linda was now breadwinner, providing for the family, and doing all the driving, This was yet another thing that was hard for Les to take.

After the four-hour drive, on April 7, 2000, their visit with doctor Banks was over in less than 30 minutes. And at the conclusion of the examination, the doctor's evaluation was most disheartening. "I hate to tell you, but you can't get the transplant because you don't qualify." Les' oximetry test had been so bad, he was now considered too sick, the silicosis too far advanced, for him to receive a new lung. Doctor Banks told Les, then only age 47, that he had about a week to live.

It might have looked like Les' death was imminent, but he was fated to break through more earthly barriers as part of his struggle to hold onto life. And of course, Linda kept the faith and joined with her husband in this battle of a lifetime.

“We cried the whole way home,” Les said. “I done give up. I was right with the Lord. I figured I was just gonna take everything in stride. There was nothing else I could do. I couldn’t walk 10 feet without falling. I was using as much oxygen as I could take; 4 liters in my neck [transtracheal] and 6 in my nose. That was 10-12 altogether. You can’t go any higher than that. If I got it, [the transplant] I got it. If I didn’t, I didn’t. I just wanted to see my grandkids.”

Les had been especially close to one little grandson, Shawn. Although the little one was just a toddler, in Linda’s words, “Shawn kept Les going. Even in times of great despair, he gave him the desire to go on. Les would be down and then we’d get a call that Shawn was coming over, and Les would perk right up. When they’d be playing and Les would get tired or get a coughing spell, Shawn would just quit. Then he’d wait until his ‘papa’ felt better. He saw the tube in Les’ nose and seemed to know sometimes that ‘papa’ couldn’t play. It was something. Then after Shawn had left, Les really looked forward to his next visit with us.”

Back to the day when they learned Les was no longer on the transplant list, Linda’s reaction was, “All I could say was, the doctors may have given up – but God hasn’t. In the Bible, God tells us, ‘I will never leave you or forsake you.’ And every time something would happen, there would be a verse to follow that.”

Les continues, “So we got home from the doctor. My grandkids were at the door 20 minutes later. We couldn’t believe it. They had come all the way from Ohio. We hadn’t called them. They just showed up.”

But their time together was brief. Linda explained, “We had only been home two hours and a call came from the Cleveland Clinic. They were putting us on alert that a lung might be available. The people at the clinic were still going by Les’ old test! So according to that one he was still eligible to receive the transplant.”

Linda continues, “When you’re on alert you get ready while they check if everything matches -- you know, with your records and the new lung, the blood type and everything. If it is, you’re ready to go. They did -- and everything was a match. Our local ambulance company had been told a while back that if a call came to bring Les to the airport, he had to be their highest priority. So we called the ambulance service and there weren’t any ambulances on standby. Not a one. All the ambulances were out on calls....”

*In 1931 more than 1500 workers began construction on Hawk’s Nest Dam in West Virginia. Part of their work required blasting tunnels through the local sandstone. Little did they know that in less than a year, nearly half the workforce would be dead from acute silicosis, a direct result of blasting, shoveling, and moving the sandstone rock to create the tunnels. Sandstone is nearly pure silica, and when reduced to a breathable dust, like in the Hawk’s Nest Dam project, it becomes a deadly workplace hazard.

...to be continued...

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