

**December 26, 2004**

## **Beating the odds**

Local cardiologist back on the job, steadily getting stronger after 2003 accident  
By Sula Pettibon, The Herald, Rock Hill, South Carolina

When cardiologist Tom Johnson returned to his job after an accident left him a quadriplegic, he couldn't work for long without needing a nap.

In his office, he'd lock the wheels on his wheelchair and put his head on the desk.

"I thought I'd be working full time in two weeks," said Johnson, 42, who's been on the job about six months. "I was very unrealistic."

It's been a little more than a year since Johnson lost the use of his legs and much use of his arms after a car accident on a Florida highway. He and his wife, Michelle, were coming home from a Thanksgiving celebration when he swerved to avoid hitting the car in front of him.

His recovery found the couple spending five months at the Shepherd Center in Atlanta, which specializes in spinal cord injuries.

They've been home since May, and Johnson is striving to live as normal a life as possible. That means working; he's thrilled to be back at the Sanger Clinic in Rock Hill, where he's recently had the strength to work 32 hours a week.



*Dr. Tom Johnson, a Rock Hill cardiologist, was left quadriplegic after a car wreck more than a year ago. He has resumed seeing patients. Here he uses digital voice commands on a computer at the Sanger Clinic.*

Every day he feels stronger. He has more movement in his hands than he did several months ago, and he's learning to play rugby.

"I can grip and grab things and shake hands," said Johnson, who's learning to balance his body with just his head and shoulders. "I'm still recovering."

Learning to drive the specially-equipped van he ordered tops his goals for the new year, as does building stamina to work full time and being able to dress himself.

"Pants are still a challenge," Johnson said. "It takes years for that, I hear."

He learned a lot during his time in Atlanta, where he received physical, occupational and recreational therapy and learned to use a wheelchair and feed himself.

They came home to a house that now has a lift in the garage and a renovated bathroom with a roll-in shower. Carpet was removed from several rooms so Johnson can wheel through.

"Man, it was great to get home," Johnson said. "There was nothing hard about it."

Still, it required adjusting.

At first, it took the Johnsons several hours to get him out of bed, showered and into clothes, Michelle said. Now it takes about 90 minutes. Johnson shaves himself wearing a cuff that holds his razor and he favors pullover sweaters over buttons shirts.

He uses a voice-activated computer in the study, although he can peck out messages by hand.

Being home has helped Johnson be more independent and has given Michelle, 36, who's been at his side constantly, some time of her own. Last fall, she volunteered with Girls on Track, an after-school program for middle schoolers.

She hopes to do more running and to play tennis, not only with friends but with Johnson.

He learned to play tennis from a wheelchair at the Shepherd Center. And in September, he even participated in a tournament at Hilton Head, where 108 wheelchair players vied for \$20,000 in prize money.

"It was great," he said. "Everywhere you turned, there were people in wheelchairs."

They've also spent a lot of time with Johnson's sons from an earlier marriage. The boys, 9 and 12, were glad to have dad attend soccer games, football games and school open houses.

"There were a lot of special moments," Johnson said.

The couple has been inseparable and are dependent on each other emotionally and physically. They get depressed occasionally and boost each other up. The one-year anniversary of the accident was difficult, Michelle said.

"Even though we went through the same situation, we had a different experience," she said. "We both had our own issues going on. That was the hardest."

Johnson had no idea a year ago what his recovery would bring, he said. In fact, it could be six years or more before he reaches a plateau.

He's grateful for what he's accomplished, he said. "A lot of it gets into perspective quickly."

A big step was returning to work, where he's the local clinic's director of the echocardiogram lab. He spent the first month greeting people.

Some patients, such as Linda Patti, postponed their check-ups until he came back.

"I love him," she said during a recent appointment. "I absolutely would not consider another doctor."

That reaction was reassuring, Johnson said. "You're always nervous about how people are going to react."

He won't be able to perform catheterizations or insert pacemakers, but he can see patients and read echocardiograms.

His employers built a shelf for his computer and bought voice-activated software and a lower exam table better suited for his wheelchair. The clinic, along with the medical community, donated money to help buy machines needed for Johnson's therapy.

The Sanger Clinic was committed to helping Johnson return, said Dr. Paul Colavita, president.

"Tom was part of our family," Colavita said. "One of his main goals was to get back to work. We wanted to make that possible."

Johnson's courage has inspired everyone, Colavita said. "I'm not sure many of us would have taken it as well as him and kept the optimism of his spirit."

Johnson next wants to make rounds in the hospital. That will have to wait until he can master the van. The Toyota Sienna, which costs \$60,000, will have a remote-control ramp and a u-shaped steering wheel that his hand fits in. The brakes and accelerator are on hand-controlled levers.

The van is expected in January and the couple laughs at what a change it is from the BMW Johnson once had. "That old life is gone when sports cars were important," Michelle said.

Life is simpler. Long, hectic days have been replaced by a more relaxed pace and appreciation for the little things. They treasure the support from friends, family, patients and the medical community.

"For as much as we have to be feeling sorry for ourselves, we have a lot to be grateful for," he said. "It could be a lot worse."

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