lead

Complicated Care

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One doctor called her the miracle lady. But Lynn Morochnick, a 76-year-old grandmother of three, doesn't credit her survival from a heart attack to miracles. She attributes it to the skill and care of those who tended to her during her unexpected stay at Lahey last August.

"It started off as a normal evening," said Morochnick. "I was getting ready for bed, taking off my slippers. When I leaned over to plug in my cell phone, I suddenly felt the way you do when you dive head first into water. That's the only way I can describe it. I felt watery, all the way down to my toes."

Lynn, who had no known history of heart problems, could not imagine what was happening to her. Fortunately, she lives in an in-law apartment downstairs from two of her children, and she was able to call her son for help.

"I do think things often happen for a reason," she said. "I don't know what would have happened if my son had been working and hadn't been there. When I called him and told him that something strange was happening to me, he came right down and called 911."

The ambulance took Lynn from her house in Reading, Mass., to Lahey Clinic's Emergency Room. Chris Degnen, MD, an emergency physician on duty, had already been notified by the paramedics of Lynn's heart attack and pending arrival, and was waiting for her with a team of nurses and technicians. He promptly activated the Cardiac Catheterization Laboratory team and did not waste any time initiating treatment upon her arrival.

According to Sergio Waxman, MD, the cardiologist on call that evening, who met Morochnick in the ER, she was already in cardiogenic shock. Cardiogenic shock is a very serious complication of a heart attack. It occurs when the heart has been damaged so much that it is unable to supply enough blood to the organs of the body and blood pressure drops very low.

"Cardiogenic shock complicates about 5 percent to 10 percent of heart attacks and is associated with very poor survival rates," said Waxman.

Shown above: Lynn Morochnick with Deborah Sullivan, MS, APRN, BC, in cardiac rehabilitation.

Shown on previous page: Lynn Morochnick with Sally Demopoulos, an assistant in Cardiovascular Medicine.

The medical team immediately began working to keep Morochnick alive, administering fluids, blood thinners and other medications to maintain her blood pressure. Because of the electrical instability of the heart muscle associated with this condition, her heart stopped several times and needed to be defibrillated back into rhythm. She was shocked five or six times in the Emergency Room before she was rushed to the Cardiac Catheterization Lab.

There, Waxman, cardiology fellow Prem Singh, MD, and their team inserted a temporary pacemaker to keep Lynn's heart beating. An anesthesiologist intubated her to protect her airway and provide oxygen to her lungs. After performing a diagnostic angiogram, they discovered that one of her main coronary arteries was completely blocked. Waxman and Singh then performed a thrombectomy, a procedure to suck out the clot blocking an artery, and inserted a stent to keep the artery open.

"What made this case so complex was how sick Ms. Morochnick was," said Waxman. "In fact, while she was being treated in the cath lab, we had to shock her heart back to a normal rhythm multiple times again."

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— Sergio Waxman, MD

As for Lynn, she remembers receiving some of those shocks quite clearly. "It really is funny how your mind works," she said. "I remember thinking: Are they going to do that again? Then I heard someone say, 'It stopped,' and a moment later, thankfully, 'No, it's going…all right.'"

Another thing Lynn remembers, and much more fondly, are the doctors, nurses, physician assistants, physical therapists and others who took care of her during her recovery. "I was so impressed," said Lynn, who had never been to Lahey before. "Everyone was so kind, and they all seemed to treat each other with respect. I noticed everyone interacting with each other…the nurses and doctors and aides, and the housekeeping folks. I told the head of one of the departments, 'You should be very proud of yourself—what a great team.'"

According to Waxman, Lynn spent eight days at the Clinic and a few more at a rehabilitation facility before returning home. "I saw her in late October, and she was doing remarkably well. The overall function of her heart was preserved, which is amazing."

Lynn reports that she's feeling good and is now coming to the Clinic for cardiac rehabilitation. "I still do my own errands, and go to church and see my friends," she says. "I like getting out. What can I say? I'm a people person."

She's also a self-proclaimed hugger, and with that she adds, "If I could, I'd like to give everyone who cared for me a hug. They were all so amazing. And as for Dr. Waxman, well, he's just the best. I owe him my life."