

Making life Sunny Side Up

Near-death experience gives Elk Grove waitress new enthusiasm

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On Dec. 31 waitress Janice Crueger was closing up Sunny Side Up, a restaurant in Elk Grove Village, a routine she knows so well.

Most nights that means saying good-bye to the last customers, busing the remaining dishes and sitting down at an empty table to roll utensils into napkins. Reaching the tail end of this long day, Crueger was wiping down the syrup machine and thinking about the rest of her New Year's Eve, which she planned to spend baby-sitting her 5-year-old granddaughter, Sara.

But something suddenly went wrong inside Crueger's chest. She became disoriented and fell to the ground. Her co-workers rushed to her side. A customer recognized the symptoms as a heart attack, called 911 and got her to swallow down some aspirin. While it was the right thing to do, it wasn't going to help Crueger.

Part of her heart had ruptured, and she was dying.

"I couldn't see right. A pain went across my upper body and down through my body. I thought, 'Something isn't right,'" Crueger said.

As she was rolled into Alexian Brothers Medical Center around 6 p.m. Dec. 31, doctors said Crueger would need a miracle to see 2006.

Crueger's career is waitressing. A grandmother and a single mother with two grown daughters and a 12-year-old daughter, Crueger has no problem with getting up at 3:30 a.m. five times a week and serving meals through the morning and lunch rushes with only a couple short breaks. In fact, she likes the business. Before she started at Sunny Side Up, she worked at an International House of Pancakes in Addison for three years.

Her favorite thing about the job? Her customers.

"What keeps me at it is the regulars. At some places I've worked, 50 or 60 percent of the people who come in are regulars and they treat me great. I love meeting new people too," she said.

The gig suits her personality and her family well.

"It's what I love doing. With my 12-year-old, I can't work nights. It allows me to spend time with her," Crueger said.

When she talks about her youngest daughter Nicole, a broad smile crosses Crueger's face and

her eyes shine.

But on New Year's Eve, she came within a moment of never seeing her family again.

Within a moment

Yan Katsnelson, a cardiothoracic surgeon at Alexian Brothers, was at home when he received a 6 p.m. call from the hospital emergency room. He raced to his office where, thanks to a system put in place by the Alexian Brother network's IT department, Katsnelson was able view a CAT scan of Crueger's heart. From there he diagnosed her condition and dispatched a team before heading to the hospital.

A doctor at the hospital confirmed Katsnelson's conclusion: Crueger had suffered a rupture in her ascending aorta, the portion of the heart that pumps blood to the body's heart and arms.

Katsnelson said he performs the type of surgery Crueger required only three or four times a year. It required cooling Crueger's body to the point where blood circulation completely stopped for a period of 45 minutes during which Katsnelson repaired her aorta. The procedure started about 7:30 p.m. By midnight -- New Year's Day -- he was done. Later that morning, Crueger awoke.

When Katsnelson arrived at her bedside the next day, she was talking with visitors.

He said the surgery went perfectly, but it was a close call.

"She was a moment away from dying, but the entire process came together very well and the surgery, it saved her life," he said. "Three days later, she left the hospital."

While the procedure was not particularly remarkable, Katsnelson said her recovery was special.

"Usually people aren't out of the hospital for at least five to seven days, but she was doing fine. In the future, she should have no limitations whatsoever. She will be absolutely great," he said.

Crueger doesn't remember much after she was packed into the back of an ambulance and transported to Alexian Brothers, but she is thankful for the paramedics who raced her to the hospital and Katsnelson and the hospital staff that saved her life.

Crueger spent January and much of February recovering, but she was restless at home. When her older daughters wanted her to come live with them in Itasca for a few weeks, she refused the offer. She spent much of her time reading, but she said she became depressed.

"I'm one of those people who have to work," Crueger said.

Last month, she went back to work -- five days a week at Sunny Side Up.

"I couldn't wait to go back to work," she said. "This experience made me appreciate life even more. It wakes you up. It makes you be happy and want to make people happy every day."

But more than work, she is grateful for her family -- her daughters, Nicole, Sarah and Jessica and Sara.

"I feel like I have a lot to live for," Crueger said.

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