

Heart attack survivor Sevastian Gurulé with his wife, Elva, and daughter, Maria-Bonita, at the CHRISTUS St. Vincent Heart & Vascular Center.

The Right Place for a *Close Call*

After a 26-year career with the City of Santa Fe, Sevastian Gurulé had been considering retirement. Anticipating the change in income and benefits retirement would bring, he wanted to be sure he was in good physical condition before making his decision. He visited his doctor for a complete physical workup, for which his exam and lab work checked out as “normal.”

Despite his clean bill of health, Sevastian was unsettled. Just five months earlier, his cousin had collapsed from a heart attack at a family reunion. Fortunately, he survived, but now, Sevastian found himself wanting to be absolutely certain of his risk for a heart attack. After all, his cousin was only two years older than he, and both were still in their forties.

Sevastian's doctor ordered a cardiac stress test – the standard test for measuring cardiovascular health under exertion. The test was scheduled at CHRISTUS St. Vincent Heart & Vascular Center.

On February 8, 2017, Sevastian arrived at the Heart & Vascular Center, where he was prepped for the exam. Twelve leads from an electrocardiogram (EKG) unit were placed on different areas of his chest. The EKG would monitor electrical waves travelling through his heart with each beat. As he walked on a treadmill, the impulses would be recorded. Any irregularities in the impulses would indicate that parts of his heart might be too large or overworked.

“I couldn’t have been in a better place or in better hands when I had my heart attack. God was truly watching over me.”

– Sevastian Gurulé, patient at the CHRISTUS St. Vincent Heart & Vascular Center



CHRISTUS St. Vincent Cardiologist Marcellin Simard, M.D.

“My husband is a totally different person – physically, mentally and emotionally. [Sevastian] has consciously made an effort to recognize stress and prioritize a healthier lifestyle. Dr. Simard says ‘He’s in it to win it.’”

– Elva Gurulé, reflecting on the change in her husband, Sevastian, after his heart attack



CHRISTUS St. Vincent Clinical Exercise Physiologist Ahmed Hakeem

After 12 full minutes on the treadmill – the duration of the test – there was no physical indication of dysfunction, but before the attending nurse could shut off the treadmill, Sevastian suddenly collapsed.

“It was just after lunchtime and the waiting room was fairly quiet,” says Sevastian’s wife, Elva Gurulé. “I heard a loud thump that struck me as unusual, and I got up and walked in that direction. I heard a nurse yell, ‘Call 911!’ When I got to the testing room, Sevastian was face down on the floor next to the treadmill. He was unconscious and twitching with burns on his forearm, shoulder and side from hitting the treadmill while it was running. He was still connected to the EKG.”

Marcellin Simard, M.D., Sevastian’s cardiologist, was in the clinic and arrived quickly to the scene.

“Dr. Simard immediately began directing his care,” Elva says. “He was calling out directions to nurses as he studied the readout from the EKG.”

Sevastian had experienced a ventricular fibrillation. His heart was quivering instead of pumping blood. Medical staff immediately began CPR. He was shocked twice with a defibrillator and within minutes was transported by ambulance to CHRISTUS St. Vincent for emergency surgery.

In surgery, Dr. Simard placed two stents – tiny mesh tubes that prop open arteries to restore blood flow – in Sevastian’s circumflex artery. After three days in critical care and two days in progressive care, he was discharged.

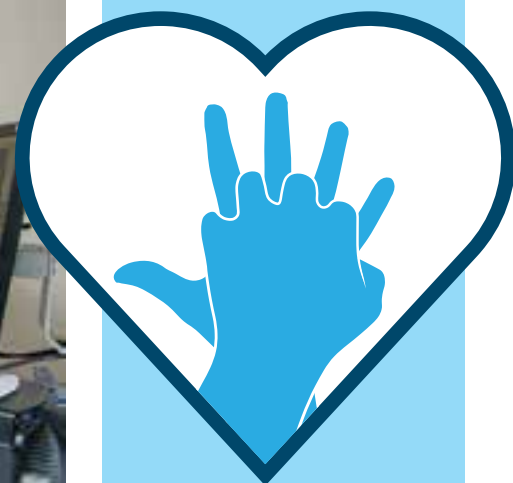
Sevastian had had the heart attack he’d hoped to avoid, and he survived. But survival was one thing. Bouncing back from the experience would be another.

“I was angry,” Sevastian says. “I felt like I had done everything to prevent this. Why did it happen?”

“My wife told me to stop and be thankful, to stop thinking about what could have happened and celebrate what did,” he continues. “Wow! I had a heart attack that put me into cardiac arrest, and I survived it by the grace of God. It took me a long time to quiet my mind and accept what had happened. It was super intense and hard to get used to.”

Sevastian and Elva are grateful for the many who had a hand in saving Sevastian’s life – from Dr. Simard to the nurses and technicians at the Heart & Vascular Center, to the emergency response team from the City of Santa Fe Fire Department.

CHRISTUS St. Vincent Heart & Vascular Center medical technician Molicio Aguilar preps Sevastian Gurulé for a stress test. Molicio was one of a team of clinicians who helped save Sevastian's life by performing CPR immediately following his heart attack.



Hands- only CPR

Every year, more than 350,000 cardiac arrests occur outside hospitals, and about 90% of those are fatal, according to the American Heart Association (AHA). If performed immediately, though, CPR can double or even triple a person's chances of survival.

If a teen or adult collapses near you, the AHA recommends you follow these simple steps:

1. Dial 911
2. Push hard and fast in the middle of the chest to a rhythm of 100 beats per minute (about the rhythm of the song "Stayin' Alive"). Ashlea Ortiz, RN, BSN, clinical educator at CHRISTUS St. Vincent, suggests finding other songs with a 100-beats-per-minute rhythm online. Add them to your playlist and be prepared for anything.

Sevastian also gives credit to the team of therapists at CHRISTUS St. Vincent's outpatient cardiac rehab facility for helping him through some of the complex emotions that are often part of the heart attack recovery process.

"I'm thankful for Ahmed, Bill and Jesse [members of CHRISTUS St. Vincent's cardiac rehab team], Sevastian says. "I had a thousand questions, and they were extremely patient. They helped me to slow down and take it one step at a time. Not only are they helping the heart, but they are building confidence. PTSD is tough – and very real. Gaining enough confidence that your body, mind and spirit can survive this is huge."

Mary Money-Gallegos, RN, a CHRISTUS St. Vincent critical care nurse, also has a special place in the Gurulé's hearts.

"She had a plastic model of the heart and would use it to demonstrate to us what had happened," Elva says. We would ask, 'Could you explain it one more time?' and she would patiently describe it in different ways to help us truly understand."

When it comes to making lifestyle changes after a heart attack, Elva points out the importance of having support.

"Having a support system is essential," she says. "Without support, heart attack survivors could easily relapse."

Described by Sevastian as a "fantastic chef," Elva and daughter, Maria-Bonita Gurulé, have worked together to identify and prepare more heart-healthy foods for the family. The family has also learned to slow down as a whole – keeping in time with the pace of Sevastian's recovery. This has included gaining the ability to take things one day at a time, be more mindful of the present moment and maintain a healthy quality of life.

"My husband is a totally different person – physically, mentally and emotionally," Elva says. "He has consciously made an effort to recognize stress and prioritize a healthier lifestyle. Dr. Simard says 'He's in it to win it.'"

Sevastian agrees, "I exercise for a minimum of one hour five to six days a week and spend an extra 1.5 hours on my off days lifting weights."

He is especially thankful for the care and encouragement he has received from Dr. Simard.

"Dr. Simard proactively takes a personal interest in his patients' care," Sevastian says. "He is totally committed to ensuring his patients are healthy."

This past February, Sevastian had his first stress test post-heart attack and saw encouraging results.

"It showed my heart is healthy and well on its way to recovery," he says.

Sevastian continued working for two years after surviving his heart attack. After completing 28 years of dedicated service to the City of Santa Fe and its residents, he is now fully enjoying his retirement. When he looks back, he sees divine intervention in what transpired.

"I couldn't have been in a better place or in better hands when I had my heart attack," Sevastian says. "God was truly watching over me." +