Back to Strong
One man’s journey to better health

Reggie Smith stands and offers his hand in greeting. He asks if you feel the strength of his handshake.

2007
“He used to have forearms like Popeye.
   He was a mason and very strong.”
— Son, Reggie, Jr.

Open Heart Surgery: Tennessee
Recovery is slow and difficult.
8 years pass...

2015
Weakness, fatigue, shortness of breath
Cardiac valve disease? Yes. And lung cancer...

Treating Reggie’s Cancer: CMHVI, Sept. 2nd
Cancerous tumor removed from right lung.
Reggie recovers.

Fixing Reggie’s Heart: CMHVI, Oct. 27th
Minimally invasive valve surgery – transcatheter aortic valve replacement (TAVR).
Reggie goes home at 2 pm the next day.

TODAY
“I feel wonderful like I’m on a natural high.
   I feel strong. I’m breathing normally. I feel like
   I’ve got my life back. It’s just awesome.”
— Reggie Smith

Read more at www.cmhvi.org
1-800-760-6622
In July of 2014, Dr. Deb Walters—scientist, grandmother, and social activist—set out via kayak from Maine on a personal quest to raise funds for Safe Passage, an organization dedicated to providing education and health services for the children of the sprawling Guatemala City dump neighborhood.

A few months into her voyage, she was stricken with a herniated disk in her neck and was forced to suspend the trip. Spinal surgery in South Carolina and rehab ensued. Undeterred, she got back in her kayak and completed her 2,500-mile trip this past January.

What was it like to be all alone in a kayak with a health crisis?
I had a massively herniated disk in my neck that was causing muscle loss and doing a little nerve damage. It wasn’t related to the kayaking expedition, but I think from about 20 years ago when I accidentally dropped a kayak on my head and went around for over a week with my neck at an angle.

It was January of 2015 in Georgetown, South Carolina, that I finally got the right diagnosis. I’d been having some trouble for years, but thought it would go away when I was in better shape. Instead it just got worse. I stopped four times during the expedition for medical diagnosis and advice. Folks gave

“I built my wooden kayak 16 years ago, but Joey Schott of Turning Point Kayaks remodeled it for me just for this expedition. He made it fit my body perfectly. It has four watertight compartments. So, just like the Titanic, it’s unsinkable.”

Determination, a big heart—and one little yellow kayak—carry Dr. Deborah Walters 2,500 miles to complete her fund-raising goal for Safe Passage in Guatemala City.

INTERVIEW BY CLAIRE Z. CRAMER
me painkillers, exercises, and even a brace. Some warned me about possible nerve damage, but a Maine physician thought it was just tendon problems and told me, “Put on your big-girl pants, and get back out there and kayak.” So I did. I kept paddling south along the South Carolina coast.

In Georgetown, I was staying with a nurse. She realized right away I was really hurting. After I went to bed, she and her husband decided they had to come up with a plan to get me to listen to her about this. Fortunately, she succeeded.

What did you decide?
Within two weeks I had the surgery in South Carolina. I needed to get it done quickly to minimize nerve damage.

Did you consider returning to Maine for surgery?
I thought about it, but I couldn’t even get an exploratory appointment for six weeks.

I was back on my feet in one day, but I couldn’t paddle again until after great physical therapy back in Maine with Joshua Hunt in Waterville.

You don’t discourage easily.
Right after the surgery, I considered halting the expedition. But that wouldn’t properly honor the grit and determination of the Safe Passage children and families. So I got my husband to bring down the car, and we carried on with my prearranged speaking engagements down the coast.

When I got to Fort Lauderdale, the SV Polaris was waiting to sail me to Central America. The original plan was to drop me and my kayak off in Belize, but since I couldn’t paddle he took me all the way to Guatemala.

The children at Safe Passage had a great celebration for me, giving me flow-
ers, making up songs and dances for me, and handing me so many little personal notes. I was so humbled by how engaged they were in the expedition.

But from your point of view, this was not the end? Folks said I’d accomplished my mission. I’d gotten myself one way or another from Maine to Guatemala and raised [awareness] and money for Safe Passage. But again, I couldn’t give up, since the children and parents don’t give up under much more adverse conditions! Also, I’d pledged to kayak 2,500 miles for the expedition. So, once recovered, I carried on.

You got back in the kayak?
I returned to Georgetown, South Carolina, in September [2015] and started paddling south. Once I got to Fort Lauderdale, I was again tempted to quit. I could look at the “Where’s Deb?” website and see my kayak tracks had reached my sailing track. Despite being really tired and ready to quit—for the third time—I had to just sigh and carry on.

I passed the 2,500-mile mark three miles from Key West and happily ended the expedition when I kayaked into Key West on January 30th, after 2,503 miles!

You increased the funds you raised for Safe Passage from $175,000 at the time your surgery became necessary to $425,000 upon completing the Carolina-to-Key-West leg by kayak. That’s a lot of money!
I had a zillion speaking engagements, and that contributed to much of the money raised. But Rotarians along the way who worked to raise money for a Rotary Foundation Global Grant for teacher education and curriculum development really helped. As did a grant from Citibank. And then a few individuals made large anonymous donations. It all added up.

Did the Rotarians set up the big celebration hoopla when you slid into Key West?
That happened organically. A local radio station interviewed me the day before and all day kept reminding folks to come and meet me at the beach. As I kayaked along, folks on bikes or walking caught my attention and said they were coming to see me! It was great!

Any scares on the final stretch to Key West?
High winds and waves were the biggest scares all along the coast. One day near Titusville, Florida, I was forced to land on a sliver of land at the base of a cliff. I crawled up the cliff and hauled my kayak up with a rope. Thanks to the Delorme inReach Explorer satellite communication device, my husband followed my progress, saw where I was, and met me in a few minutes.

On this trip, my most frightening encounter was with that scariest of marine mammals, the manatee. I was almost flipped over when I got too close to a sleeping manatee who awoke with a start and went into overdrive with his huge tail as he sped away.

Were you mostly all alone when you were out there? Yep, most days I paddled alone. On a few days the expedition had a kind of Forrest Gump quality to it, with folks just showing up to kayak with me.

I didn’t flip over once on the entire expedition, much to the chagrin of my Maine kayaking friends who had a pool on the first day I would dump.
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9th Annual Wet Paint Auction Benefit

Sunday, July 10, 2016 | 5:00pm - 8:00pm

Join award-winning artists in celebrating Cape Elizabeth’s natural beauty and agricultural heritage at Spurwink Farm, a bucolic working farm with stunning views of both Higgins Beach and the Spurwink Marsh. Live music, a catered cocktail reception and a live auction of “wet” artwork painted en plein air throughout the weekend makes this an event not to be missed!

All proceeds benefit the Cape Elizabeth Land Trust.

A limited number of tickets will be available. For more information visit: capelandtrust.org/paint

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