

Reunion celebrates better living

Bariatric patients, doctors get together to reaffirm slimmer, healthier lifestyles

By Evelyn Barge
Staff Writer

The banquet hall at Embassy Suites in Arcadia is decked out in heavy dose of pink-and-black 1950s regalia, and some of the revelers have dressed the part. Elvis scans the buffet offerings, while the Pink Ladies, in true clique fashion, have a seat at a table in the back corner.

Near the podium, a decorative high note shouts to be noticed. Reaching from the floor nearly up to the ceiling, it's a giant tower of balloons in the shape of hot-pink ice-cream cone, complete with multicolor sprinkles.

It's a playful embellishment, but not without a healthy dose of extra meaning for the more than 200 guests of honor who've assembled here. Each is a former bariatric surgery patient of Methodist Hospital, and each now lives in a world ruled by portion control.

For these patients, recent and past, the days of oversized servings of *any* kind of food are long gone. The cost? For the most part, absolutely worth it, they say.

For the last six years, Methodist Hospital has hosted the bariatric reunion to bring doctors, nurses and patients — lots and lots of patients — together for a night of celebration. At the most recent bash on April 29, many arrive with before-and-after pictures in hand, ready to catalog their weight-loss journey in the scrapbooks set up on a nearby display table.

"It's a little like being in labor and delivery," said bariatric surgeon Dr. Bengt Pehrsson. "We get to be with these patients during a happy event in their lives. These people feel really like they are born again."

Eric Swift, 64, of Bloomington is one of those people, but he had to survive a near-death experience to make it where he is today.

After years of living with obesity, his weight ballooning to as high as nearly 400 pounds, Swift can rattle off a litany of health problems he dealt with each day: high blood pressure, sleep apnea, diabetes, swollen limbs, neuropathy, immobility and even Parkinson's-like symptoms.

In June 2008, Swift suffered a major heart attack. It was his third heart attack since 1990, but by far the most serious one.

"I flat-lined twice in the ambulance," he said.

At the time of his heart attack, Swift had already been planning for weight-loss surgery, and he was relieved when his cardiologist recommended he proceed with the operation.

Since undergoing bariatric surgery in September 2008, Swift has lost about 100 pounds — 142 total pounds since he began preparing for the procedure. Where he used to take 21 different medications daily, he now takes six, and he no longer requires insulin.

At the reunion, he and his wife Mary swapped teasing one-liners like a comedic duo.

"We've been married 35 years, and I didn't know he had ribs," Mary said with a laugh.

"There's this pair of jeans I used to wear last summer," Swift chimed in. "My wife and I can both get into 'em now."

Though he's quick to banter lightly about his dramatic weight loss, Swift also recalls a time when he wondered if surgery was too drastic an approach.

"I was concerned because of all the (health) problems I had and because of my age," he said. "I asked, 'Am I worth doing this?'"

According to the Mayo Clinic, obesity surgery is recommended only for people with a



Photos by Keith Birmingham Staff Photographer

Michele Walker of San Dimas holds before and after pictures of herself during the Methodist Hospital's sixth annual bariatric reunion at Embassy Suites Hotel in Arcadia, where surgery patients celebrated weight loss. At right, Walker dances with an Elvis impersonator at the reunion.



Karen Finch, left, with her husband, Gary Finch, join Karen's parents, Eric and Mary Swift, in displaying before-and-after pictures at the reunion. Eric Swift, who had several health problems including high blood pressure, sleep apnea, diabetes, swollen limbs, neuropathy, immobility and even Parkinson's-like symptoms, has lost about 100 pounds since undergoing bariatric surgery in September 2008. Gary Finch also has undergone the bariatric procedure.

body mass index of 40 or greater, or for those with a BMI of 35 or greater who also have a serious weight-related health problem.

Surgical candidates also go through an extensive, yearlong screening process to prepare physically and psychologically for the surgery, which modifies the gastrointestinal tract.

Both common forms of bariatric procedures — gastric bypass, and the adjustable gastric band — do not end in the operating room; Patients require comprehensive lifestyle support and lifelong medical follow-ups.

Doctors at Methodist Hospital, a designated Center of Excellence of the American Society for Bariatric Surgery, perform about 200 such surgeries each year and have completed more than 2,000 total bariatric procedures, said Dr. Troy LaMar.

Now, seven months out from his surgery, Swift must follow severe dietary restrictions. He cannot consume more than 6 ounces in any given meal. And while his stomach muscles may someday expand to accommodate a

slightly larger volume of food, the change in eating habits is designed to be permanent.

Those dietary changes seemed simple in theory, but they proved more difficult to apply in real life for Swift's daughter Barbara Dupin, who also had bariatric surgery in December 2008.

"Because I was a working woman, I had to go right back to work (after the surgery)," she said. "It's hard to continue the routine the doctors prescribe. You can't stop every 10 minutes to drink an ounce of fluid."

After months of stomach discomfort and vomiting, Dupin learned from her doctor that the solution could be as simple as chewing her food very thoroughly.

"I was not doing that enough, apparently," she said. "There's a reason they tell you to do these things."

Swift's son-in-law Gary Finch of Covina also had bariatric surgery at Methodist Hospital. His wife Karen said she believes it saved his life.

"We used to have to pull four, five, six tables together for our family to eat together,"

said Swift, whose other daughters, Dawn Lane of Covina and Cindy Dupin of Brea, are also hoping to schedule bariatric procedures in the near future. "Now we pull two tables together."

These days, Michele Walker of San Dimas enjoys alternating steps on her way down the stairs. It was something she couldn't manage for five years, but now she descends to the landing with an extra spring in her gait.

The 48-year-old lost 128 pounds after her March 2008 surgery, and she feels, in a word, "fabulous."

"Some people say it's taking the easy way out," Walker said. "But it has not been an easy journey."

Still, it's been worth it, she said, to have her 7-year-old grandson be able to wrap his arms around her scaled-down frame.

She says: "I think your arms are just getting longer."

He says: "No grandma, you're getting smaller."

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