

# Rhode Island Hospital

# Breakthroughs

For our friends and supporters.



2020

## Lifesaving Care When It's Needed Most

**B**unny Ssengooba and Natasha Rybak were making plans for their future. They quietly tied the knot in August 2019 and began planning a big celebration for the next summer. Life was good; 39-year-old Bunny was running his busy medical transport company and 40-year-old infectious disease physician Natasha was looking forward to an international trip to present at a medical conference.

On October 28, 2019, Bunny dropped his wife off at the train station and thought he'd have the next week to catch up on work as she traveled. He couldn't have been more wrong. Shortly after their last text communication at 11:00 that evening when Natasha's plane was leaving the terminal for Dubai, Bunny was startled by a searing pain in his chest.

"To say it was excruciating is an understatement," Bunny recalls. "I knew I needed to call 911, because it felt like I may not be awake in the morning."

A CAT scan showed a life-threatening aortic dissection. Fortunately for Bunny, Rhode Island Hospital is a national leader in the treatment of this often-fatal condition.

An aortic dissection occurs when there is a tear in the inner layer of the aorta—the major artery that pumps blood from the heart to the rest of the body. The tear allows blood to surge into the wall of the vessel, causing the inner and middle layers of the aorta to separate (dissect). Bunny's aorta dissected from his heart all the way down to his leg arteries.



Bunny Ssengooba

"Immediate surgery is required to increase the survival rate after an aortic dissection," says Frank Sellke, MD, Chief of Cardiothoracic Surgery. The national mortality rate is 20 to 30 percent; at Rhode Island Hospital, it is less than 10 percent.

Most aortic dissections occur in patients over the age of 60 who also suffer from high blood pressure, a connective tissue disorder, or have a genetic history. For Bunny, they believe the cause was high blood pressure and Dr. Sellke says, "bad luck!"

*(continued on page 2)*



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Bunny Ssenogooba and Natasha Rybak

During a six-hour surgery, Dr. Sellke repaired Bunny's aortic valve and replaced the first part of his thoracic aorta.

When Natasha got off the plane, her phone was inundated with messages, including one from a colleague saying something had happened to Bunny. "I couldn't talk," Natasha recalls, "I called her first for the medical perspective."

By then, Bunny was safely out of surgery. "I was just relieved to hear the surgery was a success," says Natasha. And then she began her 36-hour trip home. With Wi-Fi during the flight, she was able to FaceTime with a friend at Bunny's bedside and talk to the doctors. "It helped to know he was in excellent hands," she says.

Reunited with his wife, Bunny remained in the intensive care unit and was resting comfortably, talking, and in good condition. But his ordeal was far from over. In the days that followed, Bunny's legs turned cold and he was unable to move them.

"Bunny was in the minority of patients who experience decreased blood flow in the legs as a result of the significant dissection," explains vascular surgeon Carla Moreira, MD.

To restore blood flow to Bunny's legs, Dr. Moreira, would need to perform a bypass to reroute blood flow from his chest—going around his inflamed aorta—to his groin (see Diagram 1).

After saying goodbye to Bunny in pre-op for what was expected to be a three-hour procedure, Natasha stopped briefly in the chapel to say a prayer. Just 30 minutes later, she learned that Bunny had suddenly stopped breathing before the surgery began.

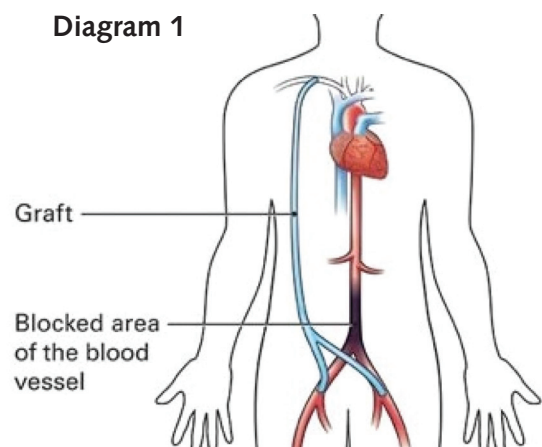
"I remember Dr. Moreira walking calmly towards me and telling me I should sit," Natasha says. Bunny was now stable, Dr. Moreira explained, but as he was being prepared for intubation, his oxygen saturation plummeted. It took three minutes of CPR to revive him.

Surgery continued. Three hours later, the bypass was a success. The next morning, Bunny was extubated. Natasha says, "The most amazing thing was within five minutes, he was able to breathe, and he looked at me and said, 'How are you? You look tired; are you okay?' It was amazing to me that after all that he went through, he thought of me."

Bunny remained in intensive care for 14 days as his body healed, including his kidneys which began to shut down as a result of the three minutes without oxygen. Discharge came just before Thanksgiving and the couple had so much to be grateful for.

"When I was in the ICU, I realized people do their job because they love doing it," Bunny says. "I'm so grateful for the care I received. Rhode Island Hospital quite literally saved my life, not once, but twice."

As Bunny continues to regain his strength, and his heart and kidneys continue to heal, he and Natasha are looking forward to their wedding celebration this summer. "We have so much to celebrate!" they say.



# Rhode Island Hospital Cardiologist Appointed Prestigious Role

**O**n March 30, 2020, Lifespan’s own Athena Poppas, MD, FACC was appointed to the prestigious national role as president of the American College of Cardiologists (ACC).

The ACC is a professional organization for cardiology that sets many standards of care that impact cardiology care around the world. Dr. Poppas is Chief of Cardiology and Director of the Lifespan Cardiovascular Institute at Rhode Island, The Miriam and Newport hospitals and a professor of medicine at The Warren Alpert Medical School of Brown University. She specializes in valvular heart disease, heart disease in women, and echocardiography and heart disease in pregnancy, and focuses her research on echocardiography and heart disease in women and the elderly.

“We are very proud of Dr. Poppas and to have one of our physicians serve in this significant leadership role,” says Lifespan President and CEO Timothy Babineau, MD.



Athena Poppas, MD, FACC

“We have some of the best cardiac care in the country right here in Rhode Island and Dr. Poppas’ new role will help showcase that.”

## Fundraising Events Come in All Shapes and Sizes

**M**edical oncologist Ariel Birnbaum, MD remembers the article he read in a magazine a decade ago that inspired him. It was about a celebrity’s diagnosis with head and neck cancer and a dog walk. Dr. Birnbaum, who also specializes in head and neck cancer at the Lifespan Cancer Institute, mentioned the idea of a dog walk fundraiser to his colleagues and the rest is history.



Now in its tenth year, Paws for a Cause Dog Walk is not only raising awareness for head and neck cancer, it has raised more than \$80,000 to support patient assistance during and after treatment, and research into improvement of care for this specialized cancer.

The event has taken place each year at Slater Park with more than 70 dogs and owners participating in a short walk for a suggested donation of \$25. There is also a raffle with donated prizes. “This was a crazy idea I had and look where we are ten years later,” says Dr. Birnbaum, “I hope it’s inspiration for others – you really can turn a crazy idea into so much good.”

This year’s event scheduled for June 13 will be a virtual event. For more information about this event, or creating your own fundraising event, visit [giving.lifespan.org/Paws-for-a-Cause](http://giving.lifespan.org/Paws-for-a-Cause), call 401-444-6500, or email [RIHGiving@lifespan.org](mailto:RIHGiving@lifespan.org).



# Coping with Stress During a Pandemic

**T**he coronavirus outbreak has caused drastic changes to daily life virtually overnight, and the team in Lifespan's Psychiatry and Behavioral Health Services wants to help you better manage the anxiety that comes along with it.

Everyone experiences stress in different ways and at different times, but signs to watch for include changes to mood or feelings, physical sensations, or behaviors. Are you overwhelmed and anxious; more irritable and less able to relax; feeling tired or have muscle tension; having trouble sleeping or eating; increasing alcohol or substance use? These are just some of the changes you may notice as the first signs of stress.

During a time when so much is out of our control and stress levels are high, it can make a big difference to focus our attention on what we can control: Get a good night's sleep, eat healthy foods that positively affect your mood and energy levels, get outside at least once a day, consider limiting your daily news and social media intake, find your

supports and stay connected by scheduling virtual chats, and practice mindfulness and meditation.

Research shows that exercise can significantly help with feelings of anxiety and depression, so staying active is one of the best things you can do during these challenging times. Perhaps you've heard of practicing mindfulness and meditation but haven't tried it. Check out free apps like Headspace or Calm, which offer guided meditations that are geared toward lowering anxiety and improving sleep. With more time at home, this is a great time to try new things that could lead to an overall healthier lifestyle.

Remember, we are all in this together. If you need help, Psychiatry and Behavioral Health Services are here for you, now offering telephone and video appointments during this pandemic. To schedule an appointment with a psychiatrist and/or psychologist/therapist for ongoing treatment, please contact our Lifespan Adult Psychiatry and Behavioral Health Access Center at 401-606-0606.

## Ways of Giving

**I**f you are like many people, you have seen the value of your investments fluctuate with the markets over the years. The good news is that with a charitable gift annuity's fixed payments, you can find the peace of mind that you are looking for while also supporting the important work happening at Rhode Island Hospital.

With a charitable gift annuity, you make a gift to the hospital and in return, we will make fixed payments to you for life. After all payments have been made, Rhode Island Hospital will receive the remaining value of your gift. In addition you may also receive the added benefits of partially tax-free payments and a charitable deduction in the year that you set up the gift annuity.

For more information on how you can help ensure the future of Rhode Island Hospital please contact Chris Josephson, at (401) 444-6412 or [chris.josephson@lifespan.org](mailto:chris.josephson@lifespan.org), or visit [giving.lifespan.org/RIH-Planned-Giving](http://giving.lifespan.org/RIH-Planned-Giving).



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[rhodeislandhospital.org/giving](http://rhodeislandhospital.org/giving).



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