



Mark Hinson discusses a project with John Griffin and Ashley Higson.

Two words convinced Mark Hinson to take the ambulance:

Widow maker.



He knew that the situation was serious: Two years ago, he had had chest pains that had prompted the need for a stent to widen an obstructed blood vessel in his heart. So this time, when a problem was diagnosed, he knew that it was important to get help immediately, but thought that it would not be a problem to drive from the Boice-Willis Clinic offices to Nash Health Care. Then he was told the nickname for the particular type of blockage health care workers thought they had discovered: “the widow maker.” He took the ambulance.

Instead of a 45-minute ride to another facility, a five-minute ride took Hinson to the heart care he needed at the Nash Heart Center.

Previously, patients who needed a stent had to be transported to another facility for the procedure—which was often done by Nash Health Care cardiologists who had privileges at other hospitals. Now, thanks to a partnership with University Health Systems of Greenville, Nash Health Care is able to offer the same procedure through its Nash Heart Center, eliminating the need to leave Nash County for treatment.

Hinson is a Rocky Mount native, and his family owned business, Allegra Print and Imaging, is well-known throughout the area. As an entrepreneur, Hinson understands the importance of customer service, that it is not merely a philosophy to be practiced but also a vital part of any business, and it must be embraced daily—whether performing print jobs or placing stents. Hinson said the level of dedication and customer service displayed at the Nash Heart Center made him very thankful he opted to get treatment locally.

“I fully expected that I would be taken care of, but absolutely everyone involved in my care, from the lady who brought my food tray to the surgeons, were as accommodating and as nice as they could be,” he said. “When you receive service like that, you just have to tell people about it.”

Hinson, a diabetic, experienced his first round of chest pains two years ago. Because Nash General Hospital did not perform stent placements, Hinson sought treatment at another facility 45 minutes away, where Dr. David Varma, a cardiologist on the medical staff of Nash Health Care, performed a heart catheterization. The catheterization showed 95 percent blockage in one artery. Hinson had a stent placement, or PCI, to open the artery. PCI stands for percutaneous coronary intervention, commonly referred to as a coronary (heart) stent placement. A stent is used to widen a narrowed or obstructed blood vessel. That was 2008.

Fast forward to May 2011. One Sunday, Hinson started having chest pains. With his previous history of arterial blockage, he knew this was a warning sign to take very seriously. On Monday, he was evaluated by his physician. To Hinson's surprise, his blood pressure and pulse were normal. His EKG was perfect. There was nothing that indicated any cause for alarm. As an additional precaution, Hinson was scheduled for a stress test the next day. During a stress test, a patient exercises on a treadmill, or similar exercise machine, while physicians monitor how his or her heart is functioning.

When the treadmill was kicked into a high gear, which Hinson laughingly refers to as "Mount Everest," the result was intense pain and difficulty breathing. That's when Hinson knew he would be transported to the hospital by an ambulance.

But which hospital?

"I was told that I had choices. I could have gone back to the hospital where my earlier stent placement was performed. It was clear that the decision was up to me," he said. "I learned that Nash had new capabilities and could perform stent placements. So I didn't want to delay. If I'm going to have the same doctor and the same procedure, I'd rather stay at Nash," he added. "The process was seamless—perfect in fact. They had a room ready for me before I left Boice-Willis Clinic."

A heart catheterization revealed a blockage at the top of Hinson's LAD – left anterior descending artery... and two smaller blockages below it. This is sometimes referred to as the "widow maker" artery because if the artery is abruptly blocked, it will cause a massive heart attack that, most likely, will lead to sudden death. A couple of hours after Hinson's stress test, he had three stents placed at the Nash Heart Center.

The next day, he was discharged from the hospital.

"It was pretty hard to wrap my head around what had happened," he said. "It had been a whirlwind 24 hours with great results. Dr. Prasada was a great heart surgeon. What meant a lot to me was not only knowing that such great care was available locally, but knowing that, if something had gone wrong, a helicopter was on-site in case I needed to be transferred to Pitt Memorial Hospital, where a room was already waiting."

While it took Hinson a few days to regain his strength, he is now back in the swing of things, whether watching his daughter Sarah play tennis or catching a dance performance by his other daughter, Maggie. He's even contemplating revisiting one of his favorite hobbies: fly fishing.

Dr. David Varma, medical director of the Nash Heart Center, said, "For the last 20 years, Nash Health Care has had diagnostic capabilities, but to have an interventional procedure, patients had to drive out of county. Now, patients are able to find state-of-the-art interventional care delivered locally. This is a very positive step for Nash Health Care and the community."

Hinson said it was important for the community to be aware of the benefits of getting state-of-the-art help close to home.

"I'm glad I stayed at Nash. To have surgery the night before and be discharged the next day was amazing. This is so important for residents of Nash and Edgecombe counties to realize: these capabilities are right here at their fingertips."

For more information on the Nash Heart Center, visit www.nhcs.org.

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Listen to your heart :

CROP wellness program offers more than just treadmills

It is a story wellness and fitness specialist Jennifer Stephenson sees repeated time and time again. It is a story about perseverance and recovery, education and enlightenment. It is a story that is repeated every time she meets a new heart patient, such as Mark Hinson. It is a story she loves to tell because it is a story that never gets old.

Stephenson is a registered nurse who works with patients at the HealthFirst Wellness Center, located in the Community Medical Plaza on Noell Lane. In addition to a fitness center with a variety of aerobics classes and exercise equipment, the center is home to the Cardiopulmonary Rehabilitation Program (CROP). CROP is a state-regulated outpatient program serving individuals who may have had heart and/or lung problems. The program not only provides medically supervised exercise sessions, but it also provides intensive patient education and support, allowing patients to interact with other patients facing the same challenges.

A supervised exercise regimen can help patients who have had a stent placement or a heart attack by strengthening the heart, which goes a long way toward maintaining a healthy lifestyle. All employees at the HealthFirst Wellness Center are nurses or have a four-year degree in exercise science.

“This is much more than just an exercise class,” Stephenson said. “The CROP program also provides a support system, which helps patients in their recovery. We also check participants’ blood pressure and heart rates, as well as provide educational information on their medications and heart health.”

Depending upon the patients’ diagnoses, certain medical insurance carriers will pay for CROP programs, but it is important for patients to check with their respective policies. A doctor’s referral is needed to participate in the CROP program.

For more information, visit www.nhcs.org or call (252) 962-3479.

CROP patient Mark Hinson, far left, and wellness and fitness specialist Jennifer Stephenson far right at the HealthFirst Wellness Center.



Participants in the 12-week CROP program may have diagnoses that include but are not limited to:

- heart attack
- coronary bypass surgery
- angina pectoris
- PTCA with or without stent
- aortic valve replacement or repair
- heart/lung transplant
- emphysema
- chronic obstructive pulmonary disease
- hypertension
- diabetes
- cardiac transplant
- asthma