

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

A rancher recovers from a heart attack and regains his memory with the help of Salina Regional specialists and his family



*Rick Smith
and Calvin
Carlson*

BY JOHN BERGGREN

What if you woke up and didn't recognize your spouse of 27 years, your three grown children or even yourself when you looked in a mirror? It sounds like a storyline from Hollywood, but for Calvin Carlson, a farmer and rancher near Lindsborg, the scenario actually occurred. Calvin's story is a tale of a miraculous recovery that is still unfolding today.

On Sept. 4, 2008, after a full day on the farm, Calvin attended a volleyball game at Smoky Valley High School, where his daughter-in-law is a coach and his niece is a player. Soon after he arrived, the 51-year-old collapsed without a pulse. An off-duty highway patrolman and others in attendance began administering CPR and utilized the school's automated defibrillator in an effort to revive him. Lindsborg EMS took him from the scene to Lindsborg Community Hospital, where his heart was restarted and he was stabilized before being transferred to Salina Regional Health Center.

A RUDE AWAKENING

Initially, Calvin's doctors were unsure of how the situation would unfold. He was in a coma, and they prepared his wife, Shelly, and his children for the possibility that he might not ever wake up. Without knowing how long his brain was without oxygen, they could only wait and see.

Three days later, he awoke from his coma in the ICU, literally sitting up in bed with his family in the room. It was a relief to all that he was alive, but doctors and family members soon realized that brain damage had occurred when he could not recognize anyone.

"We were grateful when he started to talk, but fearful again when we recognized so much damage to his memory had occurred," Shelly says.

"Doctors made us aware that there was initially no way to know how much of the damage might be permanent and even if he might begin to take on a new personality, which was a strong possibility with an injury such as this."

Calvin's spiritual sense was the first to return. He began singing hymns and praise songs from church soon after he woke up. After a week in the ICU he slowly began to recognize his wife but couldn't recall any memories of their life together. Physical therapists and speech/cognitive therapists began working with him soon after he was stable and Salina cardiologist Mark Mikinski, M.D., placed a defibrillator/pacemaker a couple of weeks later to protect him from going into sudden cardiac arrest again.

THE LONG ROAD HOME

Slowly, bubbles of memories began popping up and he began recognizing more and more people with only vague recollections of who they were.

"It was as if an outline for his life began to form in his mind and slowly, slowly the finer details began filling in," Shelly says.

Calvin was placed on Salina Regional's inpatient rehabilitation unit, where he intensively began working with therapists.

Physically, Calvin responded quickly to therapy. His active life in agriculture kept him in great shape and soon hardly any physical deficit could be seen. Once, while working with a physical therapist dribbling a basketball in the gym, Calvin began dribbling the ball between his legs.

"We don't need to work on that anymore!" the therapist said with a laugh.

Cognitively, Calvin recovered much more slowly. His short-term memory and long-term memory were both weak. Family and friends spent countless hours jogging his memory and giving him support to continue his steady recovery. His amazing fortitude, optimism and sweet personality soon returned. And, he developed an overwhelming desire to see his cattle once again.

Salina Regional therapists arranged an excursion to his farm to quench his desire and as a tool for therapy. "I remember thinking I owned every place we went by on the way out," Calvin says. "But seeing the cattle and the farm gave me a lot of encouragement."

More and more memories kept flowing back and he worked ferociously with therapists on problem-solving tasks to improve memory recall. After six weeks at SRHC, Calvin was able to return home under the watchful eye of his wife, who quit her job to be by her husband's side throughout his recovery. She had an alarm put on their bedroom door to let her know if Calvin got up and ventured out in the night and had a lot of help from therapists, family, church members and neighborhood farm friends.

FEELING LIKE HIMSELF AGAIN

Occupational and speech therapists continued working with Calvin on an outpatient basis almost daily. Salina Regional therapist Rick Smith, a friend of the Carlson family, provided physical and occupational therapy out on the farm. They worked on odd tasks like hanging pictures and painting the basement using a ladder. They played basketball and went for long walks to challenge Calvin to find his way back home.

"One of the first tasks we performed required us to use a power drill, and Calvin had a difficult time trying to figure out how to plug the drill into an extension cord," Smith says. "He was determined to figure it out himself and eventually he did."

Calvin got a four-wheeler and was soon able to venture out on his own on the family land.

"I slowly loosened the reins as we became more comfortable with his recovery," Shelly says. "At first I was with him every step of the way, but then we became more confident that he wouldn't get lost or hurt himself."

The reins continue to loosen today. This summer, Calvin began buying cattle again for his stocker operation and tending to the live-stock's care needs with help from Shelly and farm friends. Calvin was able to get his driver's license back and he also began putting up his own hay again. He makes mistakes while farming, but doesn't get overly frustrated. He's back to diagnosing and fixing problems that arise and making repairs on machinery.

Ninety percent of Calvin's long-term memory has come back, but he still struggles with some short-term aspects, multitasking and making managerial decisions.

He has yet to take back the grain side of his business or the realty ventures he was once involved in, but with greater improvement his hope is to reclaim those aspects of his life as well.

A TEAM EFFORT

"This is the most successful rehabilitation story I've been involved with in my career," Smith says. "It's taken a real team effort from the cardiologist, neurologist and physical therapy staff who have communicated well with one another all along the way, and the support of Calvin's family, church, friends and community to get to where we are today."

Calvin now works with an outpatient speech/cognitive therapist twice a week through Lindsborg Community Hospital. His memories continue coming back on a weekly basis.

"Just the other day I was out in my truck and came around a bend where a corral sits that my children helped me build years ago," Calvin says. "I just stopped, looked at it and cried because it was too special of a memory to have lost."

Bill Kossow, M.D., medical director of the inpatient rehabilitation unit at Salina Regional, says there's no way to know how much more of Calvin's memory abilities will improve, nor can he put a timetable on his recovery.

"I think that with a team effort we can provide a high level of rehabilitation services right here in north central Kansas," Kossow says. "We consulted a few of the major head trauma rehabilitation centers in the Midwest to see if there were services that they could provide better and they said we were doing all of the things they could do and that it was probably better to keep him near his family and the strong support of his rural community friends. From our inpatient and outpatient care to the outpatient therapy he's continuing through the hospital in Lindsborg, the outcome of this case has been extraordinary."

Calvin is fully aware of what he's been through over the last year and often finds himself in awe of how fortunate he is.

"I hope I can be helpful to someone sometime down the road," Calvin says.



Salina Regional physical therapist Rick Smith worked with Calvin Carlson on his family farm to restore both physical and mental function after Carlson nearly died from cardiac arrest.



Farmer and rancher Calvin Carlson was able to put up his own hay this summer after a long recovery from a heart attack, coma and total memory loss.

"From the doctors and therapists to my family, neighbors and friends, it took a team effort to get to where I am today. There are too many people to name, but they've all taken me along for a ride on their shoulders and played a role in my recovery."

"The story's not over yet," Shelly says. "There are a lot of things we're still working to recover."

Calvin's sense of humor, however, is strong. "I've tried to tell him that he used to like to do the dishes and clean around the house, but Calvin just sneers," Shelly says. "He knows better than that." ❏