

HEART FAILURE

Getting Back On Track

Cars and racing are in Frank Lattarelli's blood. He started racing hot rods when he was just 13 and he has been a professional racer since 1957.



But when heart disease prevented him from doing what he loved, he was devastated.

Now, Mr. Lattarelli is working closely with the Advanced Heart Transplant and Treatment team at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital (RWJ) and Sheldon Kukafka, MD, an attending cardiologist at RWJ, who shares his passion for cars and racing, to get back on track.

"I was just completely into cars and anything mechanical," Mr. Lattarelli says. "I feel like I can fix anything. I can build a car from the ground up."

Mr. Lattarelli's heart problems began following a drag race in 1999. The parachutes which were designed to help his hot rod decelerate failed to deploy causing his car to plow into the track's safety sand trap. He escaped serious physical injury, but was short of breath.

"I was breathing heavily all afternoon, but I didn't go for treatment right away," Mr. Lattarelli says.

A year later, his physician ordered a stress test and electrocardiogram, which revealed that Mr. Lattarelli was suffering from heart failure. Because professional drivers must pass an annual physical, which includes a cardiac stress test, Mr. Lattarelli was sidelined from the sport he loved.

He initially sought treatment at a hospital in New York City, where physicians managed his illness with medications. After eight years, his

condition deteriorated and his heart was functioning at only 10 percent of its normal capacity.

Doctors there evaluated Mr. Lattarelli for a heart transplant, but he and his son researched other options.

"We thought that I would get a heart faster in New Jersey," he explains.

They contacted RWJ, where he was placed on the waiting list for a transplant. Because his heart function was so poor, RWJ's doctors implanted a left ventricular assist device (LVAD) to support his heart until a donor heart was found. An LVAD is a mechanical pump that serves as a substitute for the heart's main pumping chamber. As a leading cardiac transplant and heart failure treatment center, RWJ physicians and nurses are highly skilled and experienced in managing patients who can benefit from this technology. RWJ is one of the few centers in the region certified by the Joint Commission to offer LVADs as a permanent therapy in addition to offering it as a bridge to heart transplant.

On June 2, 2010, Mr. Lattarelli received the long-awaited good news: a donor heart was found. It was an emotional time for Mr. Lattarelli as June 2 was the anniversary of his daughter's death in a 1985 car accident.

The heart transplant, which was performed by Thomas Prendergast, MD, Clinical Associate Professor of Surgery at Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School and

an attending cardiac surgeon at RWJ, was successful and Lattarelli returned home a week later. He had regular biopsies performed in RWJ's cardiac catheterization laboratory to ensure that his body was not rejecting the donor heart. It was there that he met Dr. Kukafka.

"I made friends with one of the nurses and I brought in a picture of one of my cars to show him," Mr. Lattarelli recalls. "Dr. Kukafka was nearby and we struck up a conversation. I found out he was into racing too. I gave him a signed photo and we have been friends ever since."

In managing Mr. Lattarelli's condition, Dr. Kukafka understands his patient's desire to race again and is working closely with Jesus Almendral, MD, Assistant Professor of Medicine at Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School and Director of RWJ's Heart Transplant Program, to make sure it happens.

"Frank has been a compliant patient. As he wished to return to his profession as an automobile racer, he has been made aware that being a heart transplant recipient is not an absolute contraindication to resuming his career," Dr. Kukafka (who has also consulted with Frank's surgeon and transplant cardiologist) explains. "We know how important it is for him to get back in his car. By meeting his medical goals, we are also satisfying his personal needs."

Visit www.rwjuh.edu/heart-transplant or call 1-888-MD-RWJUH.



Show from left: Sheldon Kukafka, MD, an attending cardiologist at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital who is affiliated with New Brunswick Cardiology Group and a member of the RWJ Physician Enterprise and his patient Frank Lattarelli, who underwent a heart transplant at RWJ, both share a passion for car racing.



Show from left: Heart transplant patient Frank Lattarelli and Jesus Almendral, MD, Assistant Professor of Medicine at Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School and Director of RWJ's Heart Transplant Program.