



A Flight for Life

PATIENT PROFILE: Gina Orlando

RECENTLY, A FORMER CALSTAR PATIENT REACHED OUT TO THANK ONE OF THE FLIGHT NURSES WHO AIDED HER LAST SUMMER ON AN INTER-FACILITY FLIGHT.

She called Michael Davidson of CALSTAR 8 in Vacaville, and said “Hi, Mike, this is Gina Orlando.” There was a long silence on the phone line. “He knew exactly who I was, but I’m not sure he had expected me to survive,” she says.

According to Mike, it was a call that brought back the memory of one of the most challenging flights - with one of the most acute patients - he’d ever made. He recalls the transport in detail and finds Gina’s recovery “remarkable.”

Rolling back to July of 2013, Flight Nurses Mike Davidson and Tim Castelli first saw Gina under dire circumstances, when she was hospitalized at

Sutter Auburn Faith Hospital, and needed rapid transport to California Pacific Medical Center (CPMC) in San Francisco. Gina, a young mom of 31 years, had thought she had contracted the flu, but her condition rapidly deteriorated. Leaving for work, her mother looked in and found Gina unresponsive. She called 911. At Auburn Faith, Gina turned out to be in liver failure. Clinical staff there had never seen liver enzyme levels as high as hers. She needed to get to specialists immediately.

Quickly arranging the requested inter-facility flight, Tim and Mike set out with Pilot Paul Stack to transfer Gina to CPMC.



Mike was with Gina's mom in Auburn and she told him, "take care of my baby like she was your own." He assured her that he would.

Around Sacramento, however, things got worse. Gina's condition deteriorated during the flight, and the crew administered medications and worked to keep her alive, racing to the hospital.

Normally, air medical transports fly into San Francisco International Airport (SFO) and proceed by ground to the inner city. However, on this day, weather began to close in over SFO on the team's approach from Auburn, so they took the next most rapid option available to them. They landed in Concord and continued by ground ambulance the rest of the way into the city with red warning lamps and sirens activated for Code 3 operations.

Mike and Tim stayed with their critical patient and kept the family informed of the changes in her destination.

After Gina was admitted at CPMC and had received further testing, her family was told that her organ failure was extremely serious and her chances of survival were only about 20 percent.

The family took up residence in a hotel near the hospital. Her dad flew in from Arizona where he had been visiting family, and her brothers, young son and sister-in-law gathered in a tense vigil. Gina was "hooked up to everything, intubated, on dialysis and in an induced coma due to brain swelling,"

her mother recalls. Doctors debated about performing a liver transplant, watching her liver function closely. They did not think her chances were good. Her kidneys were shutting down.

Her mother, Marie, journaled that "Friday the 2nd of August was the worst day of my life. I was losing my child, my baby girl."

Still, as the next days slowly unfolded, the liver specialist felt that because her tests were improving, she might just pull through. Her family stayed strong and turned to prayer to help them with both the changing situation and the decisions that they had to make.

And then Gina woke up. Although this was a good sign, "that's when the crazy stuff started," she recalls. "ICU delirium is very common after liver failure." But at the time, the agitation, hallucinations, and nightmares were a new challenge for her and her family. They hung on through an emotional roller coaster ride.

The fog cleared for her at last, and Gina "came to." She apologized to the nurses for what she might have said during the delirium, and felt that she could finally breathe and function again.

Almost a year later, Gina says she is now nearly 100 percent recovered. Although there have been ups and downs, and she still struggles slightly with speech and memory, she is a totally functioning person again. The odds were completely against it, she knows, especially without having had a liver transplant.

She believes her trouble originated with long-term use of acetaminophen to treat back pain from an injury a decade before. Although linked with liver failure, she had not had high doses of the medication, and her outcome has puzzled doctors.

"I'm so grateful I have my life," she says with emotion.

"There are no words to describe the passion, love, and respect I have for everyone at CALSTAR who helped me. They were definitely a godsend. They are absolutely amazing people."

She also credits her family for being so supportive and her then seven-year-old son, Gus, for his calm confidence. "He said he always knew I was going to be OK," she recalls.

The opportunity for a reunion with one of her CALSTAR flight nurses came in late February of this year when Gina got to meet Mike and visit CALSTAR 8. Accompanied by her best friend, Gina took a short helicopter ride and received an overview of the life-saving equipment on board. "I feel like CALSTAR is now a part of my family - like the loved ones who see you at your absolute worst. I want to say 'I love you for this, you helped save my life.' I don't have words for the love and gratification I feel."

"Opportunities to meet patients and their families and hear about the way our team touched their lives are very rare in our line of work. It really just leaves you feeling privileged and in awe of the job and your colleagues," adds Mike Davidson.

As a warm gesture to the staff, Gina brought cookies from a treasured, generations-old family recipe that she, her mother and relatives love to make.

Now, she will be able to hand that recipe down to her son. ✨

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