

Exit 289

'The Legend'

She needs another miracle

Spokane Valley woman's heart keeps letting her down

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They called her "the Legend" at Sacred Heart Medical Center. Cindy Scinto had 25 heart catheterizations and two bypasses in just over two years.

Then her heart stopped beating altogether last spring and her pacemaker took over full time. The Spokane Valley woman became "the walking miracle" and jested that since her heart no longer powers up on its own, her life insurance policy may be due.

But Scinto is out of nicknames, out of second chances.

A victim of severe heart disease, she has had just about every treatment available to patients in the United States, plus one that wasn't. Nothing has stopped the progressive disease that blocks her arteries, denying her heart enough blood.

"I'm out of options right now and, really, it's kind of sad," Scinto said recently. "I'm just trying to accept it."

A year ago this week, Exit 289 profiled Scinto as she flew to Hershey, Pa., for a radical new treatment intended to grow new blood vessels in her heart. The reasoning behind the surgery was that if new blood vessels could be grown around the blocked arteries, blood would flow regardless of Scinto's condition.

She wasn't necessarily going to die if the procedure didn't work, her doctor Donald Canaday said, but she would live out her life under the heavy pull of sedatives, required to dull her responses to the most basic stimuli, birthdays, television, and family.

The doctor considered the experimental trials a last resort.

The treatment was a success. Scinto's body began growing vessels soon after scientists injected an experimental drug into the 44-year-old mother's heart. By January, she was walking out to the curb of her Greenacres home to get the mail, something she hadn't had the breath to do for a couple of years.

The native New Yorker finally had the energy to back up the sparkle in her eye and her sharp wit.

By June, doctors at the Penn State Milton S. Hershey Medical Center were worried that Scinto's progress was more than the study could take.

She wasn't flat on her back exhausted from milling around in the kitchen any more.

She was going on mile-long walks, selling garden books, homemade soap and veggie crisper bags at farmers markets.



Cindy Scinto holds an image of her heart taken in 2002. Scinto, who has aggressive heart disease, participated in a clinical trial of a synthetic growth hormone which promotes blood vessel growth. (Holly Pickett/The Spokesman-Review)

But the old Cindy kept falling apart almost as quickly as the new vessels were formed.

She underwent more angioplasties.

By the time her 14-year-old son, John, headed back to school in September, Scinto was having difficulty breathing again.

And last Thursday, one week before she was to fly to Pennsylvania for a progress checkup, Scinto was heading back to the emergency room at Sacred Heart. That crushing feeling, the one she likens to an elephant sitting on her chest, had returned.

This is how "the Legend" handles cardiac crisis: by calling her husband John at the Sprague post office and telling him not to leave work early, but to meet her later at the hospital, by making wisecracks at the nurses in E.R. who always ask if she has acid reflux and maybe that is causing her chest pain.

"No, I don't have acid reflux," Scinto planned to tell them. "I have death disease, like I could die if I don't get help."

This is where she performs her most challenging feat to date, the miracle, the legend, trying to live life on life's terms, because that's what she has left.

"I think I've learned to surrender," Scinto said. "That doesn't mean I'm giving up. I've surrendered to taking whatever comes around each day. I'll deal with it."