

## Rodney Steinmetz

### Focused on Heart Disease Ophthalmologist "sees" hope at Mayo Clinic

Rodney Steinmetz was healthfully aging. This wasn't an accident. All of his adult life, he was active in his career, community and sought out opportunities to compete in physical challenges. After his fellowship training at Mayo Clinic in the late 50s, he started a successful ophthalmologist practice in Tampa, Florida.

At age 64, Dr. Steinmetz had crossed the finish line of the acclaimed New York Marathon. He and his wife, Marilou had a beautiful summer home nestled amongst the Appalachian Mountains in North Carolina. They had four sons. Later in life, Dr. Steinmetz began foundry work and won the U.S. Postal Service's Healthy Aging letter writing contest for the State of North Carolina.



Dr. Steinmetz had a rich life – full of blessings, opportunities and experiences.

One experience included cardiovascular disease, which nearly prevented him from continuing all the activities he cultivated and enjoyed. When heart problems literally stopped Dr. Steinmetz in his tracks, this ophthalmologist turned the focus on his health.

#### Been down before

"I had been down in life once before my heart problems began," recalls Dr. Steinmetz, "and I overcame that challenge." When he was 40 years old, Dr. Steinmetz was hospitalized with a serious back problem. "At that point, I knew I wasn't as physically active as I should be, but didn't know how to increase my daily level given my hectic schedule," he recalls. "I read an article by Billy Graham that urged people to take a run after lunch instead of a nap." Dr. Steinmetz took that advice, overcame his back problem and became nearly 'addicted' to physical activity.

"As I began running more and more, I always wore a heart monitor – mostly to ensure I reached the conditioning phase of aerobic activity," notes Dr. Steinmetz. "About ten years ago, while running alone in a residential area, my heart rate went up to 160 and wouldn't go back down," he says. It was a frightening experience. "I flagged a car down and we called 911."

At the local emergency room, Dr. Steinmetz was diagnosed with atrial fibrillation, a form of arrhythmia or irregular heartbeat. A series of medications were tried with minimal results.

"Unfortunately, all medicines became less effective over time. When I completed my Foundry course, I was quite excited to put what I had learned into practice," says Dr. Steinmetz. "Just hammering on steel would trigger an episode of atrial fibrillation. Occasionally, just walking across the room would set it off," he recalls. Dr. Steinmetz was having more and more serious and prolonged periods of atrial fibrillation.

Frequently, a prolonged situation wouldn't correct itself and Dr. Steinmetz would need to take a 30-minute drive to the nearest hospital for correction. The "correction" meant an intravenous drip and an overnight stay. "My glass was definitely half empty," recalls Dr. Steinmetz. "Not only was I prevented from doing the activities I enjoy, but I lived with the constant worry that I would have an episode and need to stay overnight in the hospital to come out of it."

#### Bouncing back

"Mentally, my health was gone," remembers Dr. Steinmetz. While some might say health problems are relative, I remember hearing my condition likened to an 'annoying inconvenience.' "My doctor told me I

was getting old and I couldn't reasonably expect to finish marathons. But I didn't necessarily want to run across New York City again – I just wanted to get across my family room."

Dr. Steinmetz remembered what he had learned during his fellowship at Mayo Clinic in Rochester. "The clinic chooses its doctors for their vast knowledge and compassionate treatment of patients," he remembered. "I always told myself that if something really serious happened to me, I wanted to go back to Mayo Clinic. This was serious – my life was slowly eroding – and I wanted to go back."

"After my first appointment with Dr. Friedman, I knew there was hope for my condition," recalls Dr. Steinmetz. "I felt confident and comfortable."

"As people age, the risk of arrhythmia increases," says Paul Friedman, M.D., a cardiologist at Mayo Clinic in Rochester. "For those more than 65 years of age, approximately 5 percent exhibit atrial fibrillation. At 80 years old, the incidence increases to about 15 percent."

"When I first saw Dr. Steinmetz, he had been on medications for some time. He discontinued them because of adverse side effects, including severe fatigue," says Dr. Friedman. "While the condition was tolerable for Dr. Steinmetz if he didn't exercise, life without exercise wasn't a viable option for him."

"I suggested a pacemaker-based approach for Dr. Steinmetz, but he was more focused on a cure than a fix," recalls Dr. Friedman. "I knew that cardiac ablation around the pulmonary veins to electrically isolate "hot spots" would be an appropriate treatment, but it's not commonly done in older patients and Dr. Steinmetz was 78 years old."

Because Dr. Steinmetz was in excellent condition and wanted to remain active, Dr. Friedman proceeded with the ablation procedure. Dr. Steinmetz recalls that "It was done under local sedation and was totally painless. I went home two days later."

"The best way to diagnose atrial fibrillation is via an electrocardiogram, a non-invasive and painless test," notes Dr. Friedman. "Often, patients put off or avoid seeking treatment, fearing they can't be helped or that it involves a lot of pain to be diagnosed. For people who have episodic symptoms, smaller, credit-card devices are available and the results can be transmitted over the telephone," he says. "If quality-of-life is being affected by atrial fibrillation, I'd recommend seeing a heart rhythm specialist."

### **Life at 20/20**

"After I left Mayo Clinic, I haven't had any episodes since," reports Dr. Steinmetz. "From the moment I saw Dr. Friedman, I put my health in his hands. Because the clinic is so refined and all the parts are so well coordinated, you feel confident and comfortable with your treatment plan."

Today, Dr. Steinmetz visits the gym three times per week for weight training. In addition, he still jogs regularly at 80 years old. "I don't break any records, but I do real well," he says. "To be able to run three miles and feel great compared to struggling to cross a room is a miraculous improvement."

Dr. Steinmetz also adopted a five-mile stretch of country road and takes responsibility for keeping it clear of litter. "My heart monitor shows that stopping to pick up a few pieces of trash does not significantly affect my heart rate, so I patrol the area twice a week while taking my runs. I'm getting aerobic exercise and keeping America beautiful," he says.

While it's doubtful that you will see Dr. Steinmetz in another New York City marathon, he enjoys competing in the North Carolina Senior Games. He has won medals in running, biking, swimming and various track and field events.

"When I completed my Mayo Clinic questionnaire, I nominated Dr. Friedman for sainthood," laughs Dr. Steinmetz. "I am so thrilled with my renewed quality of life and restored heart rhythm."

Cardiac ablation at Mayo Clinic puts life back in perfect focus for this retired ophthalmologist.

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