

# Auburn family's ordeal touches hearts in a 'friendly city'

By Teresa A. Parsons

Sister Christine Iloyd met Richard Weaver for the first time the day before he suffered the massive heart attack that necessitated his heart transplant.

"I remember thinking that they seemed like the typical all-American family, out rushing around, grabbing a hamburger." Sister Christine recalled of that day three years ago. "We were present to the family during that first crisis, and I was struck by how articulate and honest Richard was at all stages. He was always able to talk the faith aspect (of the situation)."

The first time Melina Carnicelli heard of the 37-year-old Fosterville farmer was in a newspaper article detailing the subsequent plight of the Weaver family. She recalled thinking "there must be something I can do."

An hour after that thought crossed Carnicelli's mind, Sister Christine, the pastoral assistant at St. Mary's, Auburn, called and asked her to serve on a committee raising funds for Weaver's medical expenses. Although the idea was conceived at St. Mary's, the Weaver's parish, it rapidly spread to the entire Auburn community and beyond. As a result, there's hardly a person in the Finger Lakes region or even upstate New York who hasn't heard about Weaver and his struggle to pay for a "second chance at life."

Three years ago in January, Weaver unexpectedly suffered a heart attack so debilitating that his doctors told him he could not live another year without a heart transplant. After three interim operations and a mild stroke, not to mention thousands of dollars in medical expenses, Weaver awoke on Wednesday, Feb. 19, 1986, in Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center's Presbyterian Hospital, after five hours of surgery, with a new heart from an unidentified donor.

So far, doctors say he is responding well. But his ordeal is far from over. For the next six months, he must live in New York City to receive proper treatment. His living expenses there are estimated at \$2,000 per month.

Once he returns to his Cayuga County home, Weaver will still need to return to New York as often as every two weeks initially for treatment. Medication alone will cost as much as \$12,000 annually for the foreseeable future.

Weaver's insurance coverage, meanwhile, has a maximum lifetime limit which has been exceeded by now. Thanks to coverage through his wife Maureen's job as a receptionist at Crucible Specialty Metals in Syracuse, the \$125,000 cost of transplant surgery was covered. But the costs of aftercare are not.

For that reason, the Richard Weaver Transplant Fund was organized. "Heart transplants are not considered experimental anymore," explained Roberta Feldgoise, who is in charge of publicity for the fund. As a result, doctors and hospitals no longer write off their expenses.

Nor does the Internal Revenue Service. Because the Weaver Fund is not a non-profit organization, the Weaver family will have to declare the money raised as income, Feldgoise explained.

About 30 people, including Carnicelli and Sister Christine, gathered at St. Mary's for an initial meeting December 4.

"We just started contacting people and asking them to get involved. I personally have spoken to well over 100 people," Carnicelli said. "I've lived in Auburn my whole life and I've never seen anything like this."

"Auburn is a friendly, family-oriented city that would naturally empathize with a father of two children," Sister Christine added.

Fund raisers, from spaghetti suppers to



Before his heart transplant, Richard Weaver's heart was functioning at only 20 percent of capacity. Now he faces a long- and expensive-period of recuperation.

dances and pancake breakfasts, have already been organized for Richard in small towns from East Rochester to Union Springs, and have raised nearly \$15,000.

At one extreme, nine-year-old Richard Weaver Jr.'s religious education class at St. Mary's sold Christmas ornaments and raised more than \$100. On the other hand, a benefit organized by Maureen's co-workers at Crucible raised \$15,000.

"This is my idea of what Church and community are all about — it just energizes you to see what's happening," Carnicelli said.

Plenty of people have been desperately ill before in Auburn, but Carnicelli believes Weaver's plight has compelled public attention because "Richard could be any one of us, caught in a situation where you have no funds for this kind of catastrophic illness."

"He has nowhere to turn but the community. They've already sold everything but their house," Carnicelli said.

Nonetheless, the Weavers have managed to maintain a sense of humor — another reason they have drawn such considerable support. For instance, in the midst of waiting for word of a heart donor for Richard, the family was still able to laugh over a misprint on tickets to an upcoming benefit dance. Instead of reading "Richard Weaver needs a heart ... won't you give him part of yours," the tickets read "Richard Weaver needs a heart ... won't you give him yours?"

Weaver believes that God has kept him alive for a reason — that he has a mission to fulfill in helping others survive the same ordeal he is experiencing. For that reason, the committee plans to continue their fund-raising activities indefinitely to aid others who need transplant surgery.

In return for their generosity, she believes the citizens of Auburn have gained a valuable awareness of the flawed reality of medical care in the United States. "I think we live with a pipe dream that anything that happens to us medically will be covered by insurance," she explained. "That's just not the case."



Their Cayuga County home is one of the few things the Weaver family hasn't sold to pay for Richard's treatment.

## Richard Weaver Week declared in Auburn

A week-long series of events is planned in Auburn to raise money for the Richard Weaver Transplant Fund. They include:

**Monday-Friday, Feb. 24-28:** sealed bid art auction; works donated by local artists and craftsmen on exhibit between noon and 4 p.m. in the downtown Cayuga County Savings Bank lobby.

**Thursday, Feb. 27:** blood drive sponsored by the American Red Cross at St. Mary's School, 1-5 p.m.

**Friday, Feb. 28:** spaghetti supper at Sacred Heart Church hall, 5-8 p.m., sponsored by Owasco Fire Department.

**also:** Skate-a-thon, Reva Roller Drome, 7:30-11 p.m.

**Saturday, March 1:** bake sale, balloon sale, heart disease information booth at the Finger Lakes Mall, 10 a.m.-5 p.m.

**also:** International Dinner Buffet and Benefit Dance; Springside Inn; music by the Blue Lights; cocktails, 6:30 p.m., dinner, 7 p.m., dancing, 9 p.m.-1 a.m., art auction and ethnic pastries, 11 p.m.

**also:** Skate-a-thon, Reva Roller Drome, 1-3:30 p.m.

**Sunday, March 2:** fashion show and brunch; Springside Inn, 11:30-2 p.m.

**also:** Rock and Roll Showcase with six area bands; Cassidy's; 4 p.m.-2 a.m.

For more information or tickets for any of these events, contact Melina Carnicelli at (315)252-2771.

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