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Photo by
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Family faces recovery

together



Jim DeYaeger, his wife, Carol, and daughters Stephanie (left) and Jennifer pose for a photograph in their Greece home Sept. 12.

The date is forever embedded in Jennifer DeYaeger's memory: May 21, 2001, two days after her 15th birthday. That's when she was awakened at 5 a.m. by her mother.

"Here I am, thinking I'm late for school," Jennifer said.

Right about then, Jennifer's sister Stephanie looked out the bedroom window of their Greece residence. "There were two fire trucks and an ambulance. 'Is that for the neighbors?'" Stephanie recalls wondering.

No, the emergency workers were at the DeYaegers' to take away Jennifer and Stephanie's dad. He was unconscious, having suffered a massive stroke.

For a month, Jim DeYaeger remained in a coma and clung to life. His condition slowly improved, while back home his daughters and wife adjusted to a situation Jennifer previously had thought only happened on television.

"It just seemed like life was not normal. We were really into our faith because that's all we had to rely on," Jennifer said of that period.

While Jim moved from one health-care facility to another over the next few months, the girls and their mom found themselves acquiring many new chores such as mowing the lawn and trimming the hedges. "We learned how to do the laundry real fast," Jennifer added.

During that time, Jennifer said, she found herself suddenly resentful of her peers who described arguments with their parents. "I would get so aggravated when they would complain about their families, because at least they had them in good health," she said.

Jim's stroke, it was determined, was likely triggered by a condition that had been discovered a few months earlier — AVM (Arteriovenous Malformation), an abnormal collection of blood vessels. Gradual weakening of the vessels can result in severe headaches,

seizures, hemorrhaging, strokes and even death.

The AVM vessels have disappeared, but Jim has been left with severe physical limitations. Now 47, he came home for good this past March and has been largely confined to a wheelchair. That prompted another set of adjustments by the family: Jennifer, 16, and Stephanie, 12, especially found this out when their mother was out at work — she's a registered nurse — or running errands.

"It was so difficult. (Jim) wanted to go upstairs or downstairs and he would get aggravated because we wouldn't want him to, because he would fall," Jennifer said. "(But) he didn't listen. I guess he was just used to being the dad."

"Mom knew it was trouble when she'd see us in the window looking for the car," Stephanie added.

But amid all the struggles, the family has been touched by what they consider overwhelming support — from food showing up at their home, to Jim's co-workers from Eastman Kodak Co. constructing a large handicapped-accessible deck in the DeYaegers' back yard as part of the United Way Day of Caring.

Then there were the donations that helped finance a new master bedroom on the ground floor. According to Carol, well-wishers from various parts of the Rochester Diocese have contributed approximately \$15,000 for Jim and Carol, who have been parish musicians over the past two decades and also have been heavily involved in diocesan teen retreats.

"Every time I turned around, there was someone saying, 'What else can I do?' I will never be able to pay those people back and they will never know what they've done," Carol said.

Carol added that she's often been moved to tears by anonymous donations that have

shown up in the DeYaegers' mailbox. In particular she was touched when a collection was taken up for Jim at a diocesan retreat earlier this year.

And Jennifer remembers the outpouring of hugs she received while staffing a retreat in March at Camp Stella Maris — a retreat at which her dad appeared for the closing Mass.

"Through his stroke we got to know a lot more people," Jennifer said.

"We got to see how many lives he touched," Stephanie added.

Jim's physical progress will be slow, Carol said. He is partially paralyzed and walks only occasionally, using a cane. His speech is improving but he can only speak a few words at a time. However, he understands the conversation around him, and smiles and laughs frequently.

The entire family performed at a recent benefit concert (see On the Move, Sept. 12) by Cornerstone, the musical group Jim and Carol co-founded in 1993 at the family's parish, St. Charles Borromeo. "He sings beautifully," Carol said.

The DeYaegers vacationed this summer at Cape Vincent, although the trip was cut short due to difficulty getting Jim around. Still, they enjoy getting out and about together, especially to restaurants, wheelchair and all.

"We didn't really feel ashamed, because he's our dad. We don't care what people think," Stephanie stated.

Despite the challenges they endure, the DeYaeger ladies say it's all worth it just to have Jim home with them. "Sometimes it gets frustrating, but it makes up for it when we hug him. His face is priceless," Stephanie said.

And Jim, when asked what his family means to him, obviously considers them priceless as well.

"Oh God," he said, shaking his head. "Couldn't live without."