

Pinawa's 'heart lady'

Volunteer canvasser, Florence Vilks, is known as 'the heart lady' in Pinawa. The Heart and Stroke Foundation of Manitoba volunteer earned the title during last year's February canvass when she helped save a donor's life while knocking on doors.

"I can honestly say she saved my life," says annual donor, Geoff Knight. "She got me to the hospital quickly and who knows what would have happened if I called the ambulance."

Knight had been experiencing feelings of indigestion since the day before. His arm started to tingle just as Vilks began filling out his donation receipt. "He had just come in from shovelling and said he had been in pain for 15 minutes," says Vilks. "When he indicated that he felt 'pins and needles' in his arm, we thought he may be having a heart attack." Vilks immediately offered to drive Knight to Pinawa hospital.

"She was upset but calm," says Knight. "She didn't panic. I could see she was very worried about what might happen to me."

When Knight got into the hospital bed he started hyperventilating and soon passed out. Knight was given drugs to break up a clot and had to be resuscitated twice with a defibrillator. Vilks waited in the hospital for a while and then drove Knight's car home and parked it in his driveway.

"She stayed around for quite a while to see that everything was okay. She came around and saw me after I got home," says Knight.

Knight later had triple by-pass surgery and is still recovering. "It takes a long time to heal. I am 61. It goes to show that you don't know what is happening inside you," says Knight, who was generally healthy and active before the attack.

Today, Vilks says she knows more about heart attacks than ever before and realizes that it can happen to anyone, but she doesn't think of herself as a hero. "It is actually the people in the hospital that saved his life, anyone would have taken him," says Vilks.

Knight's daughters would disagree. Soon after their father went into recovery they gave Vilks a token of their appreciation. "They gave me a Kisii Stone from Kenya in the shape of a heart and thanked me for being there," says Vilks.

The homemaker and mother of three has been volunteering for HFSM for over ten years. She is happy she was there with Knight at his time of need. "It is kind of ironic that I was there the day before and he asked me to come back. I was at the right place, at the right time. It goes to show that call backs are important; you could save someone's life."

The Foundation does not receive any core government funding and is not a United Way agency. It relies on the generosity of donors like Geoff Knight and volunteers like Florence Vilks to provide needed funding for the Foundation's research, advocacy and health promotion programs. There are over 6,500 volunteers who give their time each year to the Foundation's many programs. The provincial door-to-door canvass each February raises over \$700,000.

Photo right: Happy to be alive, heart attack survivor Geoff Knight celebrates life with Florence Vilks, who saved Knight's life in February 2007.

