

Wiley Embry was a man with a tremendous heart



Shari Rudavsky, shari.rudavsky@indystar.com

8:11 p.m. EDT October 13, 2015



(Photo: Jeff Atteberry / Indianapolis Star file photo)

More than two decades ago, when a pair of Indianapolis Star journalists approached Wiley Embry about the prospect of following him through his heart transplant operation, the Southside man had one request: That the two publish the piece and promote organ donation whether or not Embry survived the procedure.

Embry came through the transplant to live an additional 24 years. Only about 50 percent of heart transplant recipients survive after 10 years. During those years, he competed in the international Transplant Olympics, counseled hundreds of cardiac patients about what to expect and even met the family of the young woman who donated her heart to him.

He died in his sleep Sunday night. He was 72.

At Mended Hearts, a peer support group for heart disease patients, Embry told everyone he met the same thing, said Pamela Hudson, the local chapter's president: "Don't be so afraid of dying that you forget to live."

Embry followed his own advice. After receiving his transplant, he took up running, something he had never done before the operation.

Soon, he started Team Indiana to participate in national and international competitions for transplant recipients. In 1995, he medaled at the Transplant Games in Manchester, England, said his wife, Val Embry.

"He came back and said, 'It doesn't get any better than that,' " she said. "The next call he got, they wanted to make him a community hero to run the torch through Indianapolis for the (1996) Olympics in Atlanta."

Born in Indianapolis, Embry met his wife-to-be in seventh grade at Indianapolis Public School 60. Val went home, told her father she had met her future husband, and her father promptly decided to move the family away from Indianapolis.

The teens kept in touch, however. When Val was 18, the two married. At the time, Embry was serving in the Army with the 101st Airborne as a paratrooper at Fort Campbell in Kentucky, Val said. The young couple moved back to their native Indianapolis.

A die-hard Cubs fan, Embry worked for several years as a professional baseball umpire and a truck driver in the offseason. Eventually he retired to spend more time with Val and their daughter, Veronica, and started driving the truck full time.

But at the age of 38, he had to retire because of his heart. In 1985, he had five bypass surgeries. Still, however, his heart continued to fail.

Eventually he went on the heart transplant list, waiting 26 months for a new heart.

For much of this period, Jeff Atteberry, a photographer for The Star, and Hal Wiley, a reporter, followed the family. They went to the hospital with him, traveled to South Carolina with him to see his brother for what Embry feared could be a final meeting, even went on vacations with him.

"In fact, Wiley always joked he was going to use them as a tax donation," Val said.

When Embry first went on the heart transplant list, his heart was functioning at about 15 percent. By the time he got his new heart, that had dipped to about 3 percent.

Atteberry recalled that during the operation, the surgeon offered to let him hold Embry's damaged heart.

"They actually said, 'Do you want to hold the new one?' And I said, 'Nope,' " he said. "You could tell the difference when they took his old heart out and why he needed the transplant."

After the operation, Embry never returned to the road as a truck driver.

Instead, he devoted his time to other heart patients. In one year, he visited more than 800 patients in the hospital to let them know there was life after heart surgery, Val said.

"He was the type of guy who could meet a complete stranger and strike up a conversation with them," recalled his friend Larry Andry, who worked with him at Mended Hearts. "He was just someone that had really dedicated his life more or less to helping people with heart problems."

Nor did he ever forget the one family that made it all possible — that of his donor. For 10 years, he thought about meeting them to thank them in person. Protocol did not make this readily possible, but Embry persisted.

Then, 11 years after his transplant, he traveled to upstate New York — Atteberry and Wiley in tow, to meet the family of Michele Dybowski, a Ball State student killed in an accident whose heart lived on in Embry's chest.

"He wanted them to know that he was going to do everything he could to do good with the life that they had given him," Val said.

For the rest of his life, he stayed in touch with her mother.

Just the other night, Val overheard him chatting on the phone with Dybowski's mother.

"Every time I thought about doing something I shouldn't do as a heart transplant patient, Michele tapped me on the shoulder and said, 'Don't you do it, Wiley,'" Embry said.

Embry will continue to try to help others even in his death, Val said. Per his instructions, his heart and body will be donated to Indiana University School of Medicine for research.

Call Star reporter Shari Rudavsky at (317) 444-6354. Follow her on Twitter: @srudavsky.

Read or Share this story: <http://indy.st/1Lt8CYv>



TOP VIDEOS



OSU crash suspect faces second degree murder charges

01:26

(/videos/news/2733078382001/457808842100



Aurora theater shooter James Holmes attacked in prison

00:27

(/videos/news/2733078382001/457695066500



Texas slammed with heavy rain, flooding

01:16

(/videos/news/2733078382001/457682639700



Train derails in Texas as flood washes away cars

00:46

(/videos/news/2733078382001/457682358500

MORE STORIES



1 shot, 3 struck by vehicles on Northside

(/videos/news/2015/10/25/74606054/)

(/videos/news/2015/10/25/74606054/)

Oct. 25, 2015, 9:27 p.m.



Mayor Debate: Hogsett vs. Brewer (/picture-

(/picture-
gallery/news/2015/10/25/mayor-
debate-hogsett-
vs-
brewer/74583934/)
gallery/news/2015/10/25/mayor-debate-hogsett-
vs-brewer/74583934/)
Oct. 25, 2015, 12:11 p.m.



**Joe Hogsett, Democratic
Indianapolis mayoral
candidate** (/picture-
gallery/news/2015/10/25/joe-
hogsett-democratic-
indianapolis-mayoral-
candidate/74486650/)
Oct. 25, 2015, 8:04 a.m.

(/picture-
gallery/news/2015/10/25/joe-
hogsett-
democratic-
indianapolis-
mayoral-
candidate/74486650/)



OLD IP, MEET THE NEW IP
Network evolution is now
a business imperative.

GET THE INSIGHT

BROCADE²

AdChoices