

“Protecting and serving is my legacy—not AFib!”

Retired transit police officer Al Eubanks isn't letting AFib stand in the way of his retirement or continued service to his community. —BY KAREN KLEIMANN

Maryland resident Al Eubanks is proud to say he can do hundreds of pushups, curl ups, resistance training and even walk a few miles every day without shortness of breath or a fluttering in his chest—a sign he's ready for the next chapter of his life.

With more than two decades of Washington metro transit service to his name, the 60-year-old is now shifting gears to help spread the word on the importance of taking care of your whole body—that's after AFib nearly put his health out of commission a few years ago.

“Helping people is in my DNA,” Al says. “But I'm not the same person I was—what I went through helped me gain a new lease on life and I'm celebrating it all. But it was a tough road to get here!”

“I couldn't catch my breath”

In 2015, when his father developed dementia, Al decided it was time to hang up his police uniform and devote himself to Dad. Despite ongoing shortness of breath, Al remained focused on caretaking. Then a few months after his father passed in early 2018, Al's health problems caught up with him.

Having always been active, Al noticed he was not just breathless, but very fatigued. Soon, he could barely walk up stairs. “I had been ignoring it before because I couldn't be sick when my pop needed me,” he says. “But I was neglecting my own health and pushing beyond my

limits. I didn't know the things I was doing were hurting my heart.”

Al had been consuming energy drinks throughout the day to stay alert and drinking alcohol at night to unwind from the stress—a combination that exacerbated his then undiagnosed AFib. By Father's Day weekend, Al could no longer breathe well, and his brother took him to the hospital. After undergoing various tests, he was diagnosed with AFib.

“My cardiologist, Dr. Nancy Davenport, said she hadn't seen a heart rhythm this bad in 18 years!” he says. Al was treated and released, expecting that to be the end of it. But it proved to be just the beginning.

“I fought it through”

Several weeks later, Al's AFib returned, along with sky-high blood pressure. A bout of pneumonia around the same time triggered a chain of events that worsened his heart condition and started shutting down his whole system. He was rushed to the hospital, where he spent weeks receiving round-the-clock treatment in the intensive care unit. Despite initial fears that he wouldn't make it, Al pulled through and made a remarkable recovery.

“It was touch and go for a while,” Al says.

It's taken Al a year to get back on his feet, but with the help of his cardiologist and primary care physician, Dr. Emanuel Brown,



he changed his lifestyle and accomplished his goal. He now diligently takes his blood thinner medication to prevent blood clots that could lead to a stroke, as well as medications to manage his heart rhythm and blood pressure. He returned to exercise and ditched the alcohol, energy drinks and junk food in favor of water, fish, lean poultry and low-sodium foods.

“It's a miracle I'm still here! It didn't happen overnight, but I got there,” he says. “My last doctor's appointment was like a party—my cardiologist is the best!”

“Life is like night and day”

Since his recovery, Al is using his retirement to reconnect with family and friends and inspire others by sharing his experience.

“I came out of this stronger and hope my story is a lesson to others to let people help you whatever it is you're facing,” he says, but particularly for those with heart conditions. “Having gone through it, I can say to others ‘You can do it, too! You are stronger than you think.’”

He's also sharing a ‘take care of yourself’ message with his fellow officers. “You're used to helping others but then when you need it,

sometimes it's hard to go look for it. You're supposed to be Iron Man all the time. I had to learn to rewrite my script and forget about that. It was like, *Here's your second chance—you've helped other people, now you need some help, so accept help.*”

Al is also looking forward to doing the activities he wasn't able to do before (COVID permitting), such as attend concerts, get lost in museums and walk through nature with his wife, Vicki.

“Now it's time to sit back and appreciate the world around me,” he says. “My health is good now. It's been an amazing turnaround!” 🙏

“Don't stop living your life!”

Al Eubanks came back from AFib stronger than ever. Here he shares his tips for living well!

Believe you can overcome your struggles. “I do calisthenics and walk to get myself back to where I was,” he says. “I appreciate life more. Everything can be gone so quick—knowing that keeps me going. I'm blessed to still be here, so I make it a point to live for each moment, even the tough ones.”

Practice self-care. “I listen to music and practice martial arts to minimize stress and take time to just enjoy the outdoors. I meditate and get out in nature—just breathing in the air and absorbing it all!” Al says, adding that prioritizing sleep was also important to his recovery. “Caregiving can be tough on sleep and I wasn't getting enough. So I make sure to now take rest breaks and get in naps when I need them.”

Get help from your support team. “My family gave me the support I needed—my brother, son and caregiver, Lisa Gabriel, who previously cared for my father, were all instrumental in getting me back to health. They were my rocks.”

Don't ignore yearly checkups. “I didn't go to the doctor regularly and I picked up some bad habits,” he says. “Now I live a healthy lifestyle and regularly see my cardiologist. She doesn't sugarcoat anything and that also keeps me on track.”