

Lisa 2.0

ONE WOMAN'S MISSION OF RECOVERY, FAITH AND HOPE AFTER COVID-19

“Jesus, if I die, I really want to live with you.”

Lisa Martin pleaded silently to Her Lord as she was wheeled into the emergency room at Memorial Satilla Hospital, Waycross, on September 27, 2020. Though her test for COVID-19 had returned “negative,” she was convinced she had the virus.

A 49-year-old educational consultant with South Central Georgia Learning Resources Center and Georgia TAPP supervisor with Okefenokee RESA, Waycross, Martin was aware of COVID’s devastating impact, especially on educators. After receiving a reprieve from a recent cancer scare only weeks before, she took the threat of the virus very seriously.

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"I LOVE BEING OUTSIDE ON A GORGEOUS DAY with my family and dogs – those days that make me feel alive."

– Lisa Martin



Photo by JOY SUMNER PHOTOGRAPHY

ABOVE: Harper Lee with Lisa and Jeff. Harper Lee, their only child who lives in Blackshear, ran her father's businesses while her mother was in the hospital



ABOVE: Lisa Martin, pre-covid, was the picture of health.

Almost at once, she began to institute protective measures for herself and her family, sending out care packages of sanitizers and masks. But after her husband, Jeff, tested positive for the virus, Lisa took little comfort from learning the truth about her symptoms.

She was right.

The life-and-death struggle of the next 60 days remains blessedly blank. What she now knows has been chronicled by family and her medical team: 59 days on a ventilator, a tracheotomy, 40 days in an induced coma, a frontal lobe stroke, and severely damaged lungs.

"I don't have any memories from mid-September to December 11," she explains, referencing the heavy sedatives and drugs that were necessary to combat the effects of the virus.

With the drugs came horrible hallucinations, enough to make her question whether she had glimpsed what Hell might be like.

"Have I done enough, been good enough, am I going to Heaven?" she asked herself. Later, she would discuss it with her husband, a former minister who holds a doctorate of ministry in applied theology.

During those blank days, Jeff would be at the forefront of the fight to save her life, researching treatments, consulting medical professionals, and advocating for her at every turn.

"When I woke up, I was so happy to be alive and out of the hallucinations," she says.

So much so, that she didn't care that she couldn't yet walk, that her left side was paralyzed, that she could not talk or eat or brush her own teeth. Her situation was so critical, she required around the clock care and assistance with everything she did.

WAKING UP FROM HER COVID NIGHTMARE WAS ONLY PART OF HER MIRACLE, SHE BELIEVES.

Since that time, she's experienced a more subtle form of re-awakening in her capacity for faith, hope and joy. Her pathway, fraught with obstacles, has granted her with grace, courage and conviction to prevail in her heroic journey through the difficult healing process.

"Recovery is hard. I didn't just come home and sit home. Since the first of January, I have had five physical therapy sessions a week."

Nurses and therapists help her with a regimen of challenging physical exercises and endurance training. Most recently, she has begun pulmonary rehabilitation therapy with the Bacon County Pulmonary Rehab in Alma.

"Though she's not completely independent, she's been able to advance fairly quickly," says Amanda Manning, P.T.A., based out of Memorial Satilla Health, Waycross. "She started from scratch, started completely over. Lisa has really advanced her endurance level."

Personal goal setting and a daily agenda set Lisa apart from others, Manning says.

"She's adamant that she wants to do it by herself," she says. "She wants to know 'x' number of steps today, and how many more tomorrow."

The positivity, daily small victories and determined progress are a long way from the days when Manning worked on passive range motion with an incapacitated Lisa in the hospital.

"COVID really hits hard, making many patients feel bad to the point that they're depressed," says Aris Cochon, M.D., Lisa's primary care physician at TriMed Advance Health, Waycross.



OPENING PAGE:

Today, Lisa is grateful for the little things that keep her going. Daily activities, such as going for a walk with her hound dog, Birdie, in the parking lot of First Baptist Church next door to her house, has offered the companionship she's needed.

LEFT:

Lisa has followed a tough regimen of challenging physical exercises, endurance training, and pulmonary rehabilitation.



ABOVE:

Lisa's brother, Parker Ray, Decatur, with Lisa Martin on her first day out of the hospital, the first time he'd seen her or had a conversation with her in months. "She thrives when you put a goal in front of her, and she'll do everything possible to accomplish it. All my life, she's the most determined, focused, goal-oriented person I have ever met or will ever meet," Parker said.

Many patients have a feeling of giving up. They refuse to get up or walk because they have trouble breathing, he says. Once a person falls ill, there's no guarantee they'll get better. They need to want to get better and want to get home.



ABOVE:

Lisa's 50th birthday celebration was held on a parade-style float so that she could greet friends waving from their porches.



With Jeff & Lisa on Easter, 2021 are Lisa's father and mother, Howard & (name) Ray, and their children, Jack, Madison, Harper Lee and Natalie. The children make it a point to talk with Lisa frequently. They share texts, songs, and photos about their lives and their experience of Lisa's COVID battle.

wearing tennis shoes instead of dress shoes.

At some point, the tissue in her lungs became so scarred with disease that doctors believed a double lung transplant was her only hope for a normal life. The oxygen she wears at night reminds her that once again, her progress defies the odds and that her lungs are healing themselves.

Lisa remains committed to full recovery, steadily chipping away at reducing the medicines and supports she needs as she rebuilds her life and health.

"I try not to think about how close I came to death, because every day is a gift, she says. "This is the new me. This is Lisa 2.0. I'm living each day not knowing what the future brings for me. I'm going to deal with the effects of covid for the rest of my life."

No doubt, COVID has left telltale signs of its presence, low blood pressure and a racing heartbeat may be here to stay. Doctors are unsure what the future holds in terms of medications and long-term effects on her health and life span.

"COVID does a number on people's hearts," she says. "Am I a ticking time bomb? Will I wake up in a year and find a delayed response from having COVID?"

No-one really knows.

Lisa's four children, Madison, 27, and Jack, 19, both of Statesboro; Harper Lee, 25, Blackshear; Natalie, 22, Fitzgerald, were told that recovery was a long process. Lisa would likely not get better quickly.

Harper Lee - who ran her father's businesses while her mother was in

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— Lisa Martin —

the hospital - says once her mother woke up, her unwavering focus has been on what she needs to do to get back on her feet. She describes her mother as "stubborn, in a good way," with the ability to "power through obstacles" and finish anything she starts without regard for the odds.

Hope and motivation are Lisa's anchors during a time of uncertainty and daily hard work, says Harper Lee. Her mother has great strength, a belief in herself and the ability to persevere through a trauma like this one and see it through.

"There will never be a pre-COVID normal," Lisa says. "Even though I'm at home, I'm still in quarantine. If I get a cold, a stomach virus, anything, I will be back in the hospital. I couldn't get the vaccine until I was 90 days negative, and then I had to wait until my body was strong enough."

The vaccine was essential to her ability to fight off the virus in the future, her pulmonologist said.

Manning, however, has little doubt that Lisa's strong faith, close-knit family, and Christian values have contributed to her recovery, providing the strong personal foundation that's needed to push forward during the difficult recovery process.

These days, Lisa appreciates her ever-increasing independence, afternoon walks with her daughter, Harper Lee, and her newfound ability to care for her four-legged friends: two Frenchies, a cockapoo, and a bloodhound named "Birdie," who proved an important part of her early recovery:

"My husband would bring her to visit every day, and she would sit on my feet," Lisa recalls. "It gave me something to look forward to every single day. Petting her made me feel that life was a little more normal."

TO DATE, *Lisa's story*

AND THE MIRACLE OF HER AWAKENING - has been covered by more than 25 local and national media outlets, including Good Morning America, People Magazine, and Fox News. It has been chronicled across four continents, reaching tens of thousands of FaceBook™ followers and readers from North America, South America, Europe and Africa. She's even been interviewed about her experience by the Brooklyn Archdiocese of the Catholic Church.

THE FAMILY NOW HAS A STRICT COVID PROTOCOL.

"Now when people come to visit, we sit outside," Lisa says. The experience has made her more grateful for the beauty of nature and God's creation than she ever was pre-COVID.

The children are tested before every overnight visit. Guests check their temperatures, use hand sanitizer, and wear masks and gloves. Even Jack had to wait to visit at least 14 days after his return from spring break.

Now that their mother is home, the entire family has continued to work together as a team, dividing duties and beginning to make plans for the future. Though at first efforts were limited to the immediate family, Lisa's siblings and parents have ensured that Lisa has the continued support that she needs.

"They tell me how much they love me," she says. "I know 100% that if I would have died, their world would have been broken in two. They tell me I'm the heart of the family."

The family agrees.

"The whole family, we give all praise to God, whenever she woke up, we couldn't believe it after all she'd gone through," says Madison. "She sees her recovery as a true miracle, witnessed, with positivity. A lot of people have been saved through her experience. She is an example that faith is strong and real."

Howard Ray, Lisa's father, of Douglas, a retired superintendent of schools and university administrator, believes her recovery offers a spiritual message.

"She is a miracle. The Lord is still in the healing business today, not just in the past."

Another miracle for Lisa is the realization of a lifelong dream: a Saint Simons Island beach house, now firmly at the center of a meaningful next phase in her life shared with Jeff, her children, and future grandchildren.

Lisa calls the beach house their "recovery home." Not only due to her recovery from COVID, but from the depression and general malaise that defined her life in the days before.

Gratefully, the love she shares with Jeff has been renewed, as has their shared faith.

"Now, there's a greater appreciation for my wife," Jeff says, explaining that he listens more and has more patience.

The experience changed both of them for the better, inside and out. He describes it as a "test of faith that has led to thanksgiving and appreciation to God and Lisa."

"We get a do-over, and we're really going to live," Lisa says. "It's up to us to sit still, pay attention, and to listen. I'm told a million times a day how much he loves me. He will randomly grab my hand and say, 'I'm so glad you're still with me.'" **OL**