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2008 Medical Miracles Honoree named & set to be recognized April 30

San Antonio Police Officer fights more than crime

A sore throat led to the fight of his life. Now he's warning others.

(SAN ANTONIO, TX –March 19, 2008) Everyone gets a sore throat, right? That's what San Antonio Police Officer Larry Price first thought when his throat started hurting in the summer of 2006. But, when the pain persisted and it became difficult to swallow he made an appointment with a doctor. He'd always had a problem with acid reflux, and has a family history of cancer, so he knew the news might not be good.

He was right. Officer Price was diagnosed with Barrett's Disease and told he had a high risk of developing, or could *already* have, esophageal cancer – one of the fastest growing and deadliest forms.

"It was a shock when Dr. Johnson told me what he wanted to do," Price says. "I had no idea they could do such a thing." UT Health Science Center thoracic surgeon Scott Johnson wanted to remove Officer Price's esophagus and "build" him a "new one" from a portion of his stomach. Scary as it sounded, the decision "was a no-brainer" for Price, since there really wasn't a better option. Within weeks he was at University Hospital undergoing this major operation.

Larry Price had always been fit and healthy, so he fully expected to "bounce" right back. His body had other plans. The road to recovery included a couple of stops back in the hospital for very serious infections – one that even spread to his heart, caused his kidneys to start failing and left doctors stumped on how to make him better.

"I remember teams of whispering doctors in my room. I didn't think that was a good sign," Price says now with a little chuckle. It certainly felt that anything that *could* go wrong – did. "I wasn't worrying about dying, for myself," Larry remembers, as his smile fades. "But I was worried about Michelle." Larry's wife Michelle was doing a lot of worrying on her own. "Everyone was

calling me and asking me why he was not responding and asking me what we were going to do,” she adds. “I just didn’t know. I didn’t have any answers for them.”

Even after the infections finally cleared, Price’s body was struggling to compensate for the loss of 80 percent of his esophagus and 20 percent of his stomach. He was so nauseated and sick he could barely eat. He went back at work anyway in late 2006 – sometimes for 12 or 14 hours a day. “I told Dr. Johnson that I was fine and that I needed to get back to work,” he recalls. “I am part of three-man unit and they had been carrying the load without me for too long.”

He would eat very little, or not at all, during his shift because he didn’t want to get sick. He began literally wasting away. He had lost more than 30 percent of his total weight when Dr. Johnson stepped in. “He was the sickest patient I’d ever had,” he recalls. “It was so frustrating to see him so miserable for so long, and know that it was something I did.” He told Larry to try to eat smaller meals more frequently. He also made a deal with him. “I told him I’d buy him a bottle of wine for every 15 pounds he gained.” His final order was firm: Larry was to slow down and take at least two months off.

Those were tough marching orders for Price, who never had a sick day in 26 years in law enforcement, and who had come back quickly from duty-related injuries in years past. But, he knew his life depended on giving his body time to heal. “I learned that an illness is not like an injury,” Price explains. “You can’t just tape it up and go on.”

Officer Price is back on the job – now in his twenty-eighth year as a police officer, the last 18 with SAPD. He’s gained some weight (although, so far, he’s only earned one bottle of wine from Dr. Johnson), works out at the gym, and is feeling stronger everyday. His life runs in a little slower gear these days. Larry and Michelle recently bought a 31-foot cabin cruiser and a puppy. “Life is a little more balanced now,” says Michelle. They know better than most that everyday is a gift that shouldn’t be taken for granted. They also know the cancer cells could come back.

Every chance he can, Officer Price spreads the message about the danger of not taking acid reflux seriously. “Go to the doctor and get checked out. Don’t just make the pain go away and mask the problem by taking antacids,” is his advice. “Antacid use takes the bite and the sting out of the reflux, but doesn’t go to the heart of the problem,” Dr. Johnson explains.

The problem is often a defective lower esophageal sphincter, a flaw in the flap that acts as a barrier between the stomach and the esophagus. While pills may reduce the acid, the faulty flap may still allow the cell changes that put patients at risk for cancer.

Price’s cancer was caught at Stage Zero. He knows it could have been so much worse. Each year, 15,000 people in the U.S. die of esophageal cancer because they were diagnosed too late. In fact, only 16 percent of patients with the full-blown cancer survive more than five years.

Even during the worst of his ordeal he never asked “Why me?” “It was more like why *not* me?” Price explains. He’s attended enough funerals for fallen officers to know that life comes with no guarantees. In fact, three of his 43 classmates at the SAPD academy have died in the line of duty,

as have several other friends who he worked with over his career. He believes that everything happens for a reason and continues to look for “the good” in this experience.

Certainly, one good turn deserves another. “As a police officer, I have always been the guy who was the first on the scene, ready to rescue people. This time it was me needing to be rescued.”

Officer Price will be honored as the 2008 University Health System Foundation Medical Miracles Honoree on April 30 at the Westin Riverwalk Hotel. Proceeds will benefit University Health System Foundation projects/programs such as the Burned Children’s Fund, Nursing Scholarships, Safety Seats, and the Neonatal ICU at University Hospital, just to name a few. For ticket information, please call 210-358-9860.