

At 100, she's oldest to have new heart procedure

BY DONNA VICKROY dvickroy@southtownstar.com Twitter: @dvickroy February 22, 2013 9:46PM
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PEOPLE UP NORTH JUST DON'T GET IT

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A HEART THAT'LL KEEP ON TICKING

Irene Vivich, 100, has more spring in her step thanks to a newly approved heart procedure
DONNA VICKROY, PAGE 4

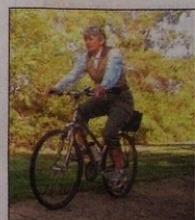
"Given how well she's doing, I'd say she could live to be 125."
DR. NOURI AL-KHALED,
Irene Vivich's cardiologist



OAK LAWN
-MAZE-ING MEMORIAL
Lawn Children's Museum bit pays tribute to 10-year-old
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Millions of dollars recently approved to construct the western half of the Cal-Sag Trail from Alsip west to Lemont | **PAGE 22**



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Leaning on her cane in the lobby of Christ Medical Center, clad in a black North Face jacket, Irene Vicich said, "I like Palermo's pizza with thin crust and a glass, or two, of zinfandel. Sometimes, if I have one too many, I end up dancing on the tables." Vicich, who's been around since the year the Titanic sank, knows how to have a good time. Her spirit has earned her the nickname "Bingo Irene" at St. Turibius Church on Chicago's Southwest Side. "I'm three months away from turning 101," she said, proudly. "I clean my own house," she added. She also cleans the alley and streets near her Midway-area home, prompting many neighbors to ask, jokingly, if she's on the city's payroll. Vicich attributes her longevity to a lifetime of hard work, a busy social agenda and, of course, her Croatian blood. Now she can also credit a newly approved heart procedure that spared her the risks associated with open-heart surgery, and put the spring back in her step. "Given how well she's doing," said Dr. Nouri Al-Khaled, her cardiologist at the Oak Lawn medical center. "I'd say she could live to be 125." "What, 125?" she said, turning to him and gasping. "Do you know what I'll look like by then?" On Nov. 29, Vicich became only the fifth patient at Christ and likely "the oldest in the world," Al-Khaled said, to undergo a transcatheter aortic valve replacement or TAVR. The procedure, recently approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, enables a team of surgeons and cardiologists to replace the aortic valve without opening the chest and without requiring heavy anesthesia, which Al-Khaled said can increase the risk of complications in elderly patients. Vicich's age made her a good candidate for the procedure. So did the fact that but for a deteriorating valve, she'd been in pretty good shape. She said she has a lifetime of factory jobs, including one in which she shook barrels of peanuts en route to becoming peanut butter, to thank for that.

Similar to angioplasty, when a patient undergoes a TAVR, a balloon catheter is inserted into the groin and threaded to the heart. Once it reaches the damaged aortic valve, the balloon is inflated and an attached new valve is inserted. Though it sounds simpler and is indeed less risky than traditional open-heart surgery, Al-Khaled said about 27 specialists, including a team of surgeons and cardiologists, were in the operating room during the procedure, just in case. Though they expected everything to go fine, Al-Khaled said doctors were prepared to perform open-heart surgery if anything were to go wrong. "We take every case with great seriousness," he said. Vicich grew up just south of Springfield, the oldest of eight children. "I was a coal miner's daughter," she said. She'd just finished eighth grade when a cousin visiting from Chicago offered to bring her to the big city and find her a job. She was only 14 but the prospect of earning \$12 to \$14 a week was too good to pass up. In addition to the peanut factory, she worked for a time making ties. She was once chosen to make the ties in a store window so the public could see the craftsmanship.

She met her husband, Joseph Vicich, at a lodge she had joined. The couple went on to have two children, Arleen, who lives in Yorkville with her husband, and Joseph Jr., who died of leukemia. Joseph Sr. died in 1995. Vicich was a steward for Kerr Canning Co. in Chicago when she retired at age 65. Though she doesn't earn a paycheck anymore and

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despite the fact that she never learned to drive, her lifestyle could exhaust someone half her age.

In addition to playing bingo weekly and chatting things up with the “handsome” man at the nearby Burger King, Vicich said, “I belong to nine clubs; I used to be in 13.”

There’s the Jolly Seniors, the Golden Age group and the Heritage Club, to name a few. When Vicich told Al-Khaled, her longtime physician, late last summer that she was experiencing shortness of breath, he knew then she’d be a good candidate for the procedure. But it was brand new. He needed more tests to make sure she could withstand the operation and that she met the anatomical criteria — same valve size, same vessel size, etc.

By the time the logistics were ready, Vicich was so short of breath, she could barely make it from the bedroom to the bathroom.

Al-Khaled suggested the procedure.

“I couldn’t make up my mind about that,” Vicich said. “So I asked him to tell me what to do and you know what he said? He said, ‘You’re playing with a full deck so you have to make this decision on your own.’” She opted to have it done, and then promptly made plans for her funeral. “I was getting my panties and my booties ready for the casket,” she said. Together with her longtime friend, Beverly Czech, she began packaging up holiday gift boxes of nuts, which Czech was directed to distribute at Christmas to Vicich’s

many friends. “I had boxes for my friends and for all the people who drive me around and help me,” Vicich said. “Everything was ready,” Czech said. It was all for naught. Not only did Vicich breeze through the procedure, she was up and smiling that very night. “She’s made a spectacular recovery,” Al-Khaled said, patting Vicich’s hand. “That’s a Croatian for you,” she said. Her sense of humor remained intact throughout the ordeal. After her surgery, Vicich said, a parade of doctors came through her room, wanting to examine the

incision in her leg and see how the new procedure had taken effect. “There were so many doctors all picking up my sheet, I said, ‘I should put a tip basket in here.’ Why should they get a free peek?” she said. The doctor-patient bond is so strong that one time, when Vicich learned her HMO insurance no longer would allow her to see Al-Khaled, she paid for her visits out of

pocket, and when selection time came around again, she switched to a PPO. “Irene is not only a close friend, she’s like a relative,” Al-Khaled said. “I wanted to make sure we did whatever we had to do to ensure she would come through.” Though their get-together last week was to share their story, not exchange medical updates, Vicich asked something she’d been wondering about for months. “You know, when you were messing around with me?” she said. “Not the way I’d put it,” he interrupted, smiling. “Well, what happened to the old valve, the one you replaced?” she said. Al-Khaled explained that the new valve was inserted inside the old one, pushing the old one against the vessel wall. “It won’t bother you anymore,” he said. “I’m a recycled teenager,” Vicich concluded, to which Al-Khaled retorted, “I think you’re the bionic woman.”

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