

Heart Attack Patient Gets a Second Chance

A Kaiser Permanente cardiac team saves a Roseville patient's life; health educators change his lifestyle.

Kaiser Permanente member Leron Lee, 71, was a top-tier athlete most of his life and, during those years, he adopted some unhealthy dietary habits that caught up to him later. In January 2019, those bad habits landed Lee in the Kaiser Permanente Roseville Emergency Department following a heart attack that forced him to make some tough lifestyle changes.

At age 18, Lee was turned down for several scholarship opportunities for both football and baseball, but still became the number one draft pick of the 1969 St. Louis Cardinals. Incredibly active and always playing or working out, Lee mostly ate whatever he wanted, and his body would accommodate. Beginning in high school, he recalled eating a dozen eggs every day — a habit that continued through his entire major league baseball career.

Eating red meat with most meals and adding salt to just about anything was common for Lee. After his retirement from 20 seasons of professional baseball, Lee continued to eat as if he were a young athlete. All the while his daily activity level continued to decline.

Lee began to turn his life around on Jan. 21, 2019, but not until after he suffered an agonizing heart attack.

"I woke up, went downstairs, and took a couple of baby aspirin, then decided to grab the entire bottle and head back upstairs to the bedroom," recalled Lee. "When I got up there, I looked at my wife and asked, 'Would you like to take me to the hospital?'" After that, Lee doesn't remember much until waking up in the Kaiser Permanente Roseville ICU.

"He was very acutely ill, so there was a host of specialties managing his care," said Harn-Cherng Shiue, MD, chief of Interventional Cardiology, Kaiser Permanente Sacramento Valley. "Opening his artery and re-establishing fluid to the heart, that is just the initial step. The biggest part is to make lifestyle changes."

Before Lee left the hospital, he was enrolled in Kaiser Permanente's Health Information Cardiac Rehabilitation Service to help provide the education needed to make lasting changes. From Home Health nurses to physical therapists to registered dietitians, an entire team of providers was helping teach Lee — and his family — how to recover from the heart attack and make lifestyle changes.

"They actually got me off of salt, which I thought would never happen," said Lee.

Today, Lee is nearly 50 pounds lighter with blood pressure and cholesterol levels in the healthy

range. Not only has he given up adding salt to his food, he now looks at red meat as something to be enjoyed on occasion rather than at every meal.

To celebrate Lee's recovery and turnaround, he was reunited at center court of a Sacramento Kings game with his care team recently.

"We are just really grateful," said his wife Vicquie Lee. "We seriously think that if it wasn't for Kaiser Permanente, he wouldn't be here with us right now."