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## On Pace to Help the Healing

**BYLINE: By DENNIS SHAUGHNESSEY, Sun Staff**

LOWELL -- What did it take to get Chris Silva off the couch, quit smoking and lose weight? It took brain surgery. Not his, but his wife, Varina's.

Varina Silva underwent brain surgery in February, a month after she was diagnosed with arteriovenous malformation (AVM), a disorder of the blood vessels in the brain that can result in an aneurysm.

"I came home from the gym one afternoon and I put my keys down," she remembered. "All of a sudden it was like someone came up behind me and started stabbing me in the back of the head with an ice pick."

She took a pain reliever and went to bed, but the pain never went away completely. That night she woke up in excruciating pain. She began tearing at the hair in the back of her head.

The next morning, at Harvard-Vanguard Medical Associates in Chelmsford, doctors tested. They sent her to Lowell General Hospital, where she underwent a CT-scan.

"They just wanted to rule out anything serious," said Chris, who was by her side. "She kept complaining about pressure on the head."

After the scan, the couple, who live in Lowell, sat in the waiting room for three hours.

"I wanted to get home and watch American Idol," Varina joked. "Then they said the doctor wanted to talk to me on the desk phone."

Varina was told that a wheelchair was on its way to get her and take her to the emergency room.

What followed was the buzz and activity that only an emergency room can produce.

"I had doctors and nurses all around me, sticking IV (intravenous) tubes in me and taking this pressure and that pressure," she remembers. "Then Chris jumps up and says, 'What's the matter?'"

Doctors explained that Varina's brain was bleeding and she had a possible aneurysm.

"I started thinking I was going to die that night," she said.

She called her 17-year-old daughter, Vanetta, and told her something was wrong. She told her daughter to look after the boys, Varian, 15, and Matthias, 7.

"I talked to the boys and said, 'Something is wrong with Mommy.' I thought I may never talk to them again."

Doctors gave her three options. She could undergo brain surgery, schedule radiation treatments, or do nothing and wait.

"With radiation you have to wait about two years to see if it was effective," Chris said. "That's no way to live."

The couple opted for surgery. Dr. Arthur Day, a neurosurgeon at Brigham & Women's Hospital in Boston, performed the 12-hour surgery on Feb. 21. She spent 10 days in the hospital and two weeks in bed when she got home. Family life was put on hold.

Chris took time out of his job at Millipore Corp. in Bedford, where he works as an electrician. He used up his sick time and vacation time. Vanetta, a freshman at Middlesex Community College in Lowell, cooked, cleaned, washed laundry and basically ran the house. Friends and other family members pitched in.

"Your mind starts to think of all kinds of things," said Chris, 28. "What kind of life was she going to have? Would she still have her motor skills? Would she be able to walk? Talk? Would she be able to enjoy her life? How will the kids deal with this?"

Chris was a smoker, and was up to a pack a day, maybe more. He put on weight. In April, Chris decided that he needed to be all he could be for his wife and his family. He started running. Small distances at first, but always pushing himself to go a little farther. He now runs seven miles four days a week. He's dropped more than 30 pounds and now weighs 201.

A month ago, he quit smoking. Cold turkey.

"He smells better now," Varina said. "Before it was like kissing an ashtray."

In the last nine months, the family has had to get by without Varina's income. For the past 15 years, Varina, 37, has worked as a paralegal for several law offices in Lowell. Insurance has helped with 80 percent of the Silva's medical expenses, but like in any household, the normal everyday expenses start to pile up. Bills go unpaid and there is never enough money to make ends meet. She still suffers from seizures, blurred vision and loses her balance on occasion.

Chris heard about the Oct. 15 Bay State Marathon and The Sun Half-Marathon, which runs in Lowell over half of the Bay State Marathon course. He is picking up sponsors for the run, hoping to cover some of the family's outstanding bills. He will run the 13.1-mile Sun Half-Marathon while the family cheers him on.

"I really can't believe he's doing this for me," Varina said. "I met a great guy. I have a great family and great friends."

Chris, who is 28, said every step he runs is for his wife of seven years.

"I guess I'm doing this to show her how much I appreciate her and how much I love her," Chris said. "I feel better and I feel like I can help her better. I figure she suffered so I can suffer a little, too."

Those wishing to contribute can send their donations to "Rina's Run," care of Jeanne D'Arc Credit Union, 658 Merrimack St. Lowell, MA, 01852.

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