





Saving a Big Heart

Alvin Riney, Patient

Edward Coverstone, Physician-researcher

Alvin Riney is one of those people you like immediately, and who you want to be okay.

A big man with a deep, gentle voice, he spent eight years as a police officer, but didn't find law enforcement fulfilling. He left the force and, while thinking about what to do next, started substitute teaching. The experience was a revelation.

"I fell in love with it," he says. "I liked working with the kids. And I felt like I could be more helpful in the classroom than in a squad car."

He got his teaching certificate and spent the next thirteen years working with special-needs children in the Mehlville school district just south of St. Louis. He also coached track, football and girls' basketball in south St. Louis and Jefferson Counties, and he's still actively working with kids.



"I love volunteering," he says. "Nothing more rewarding than helping kids develop fundamental skills."

The man has a big heart – but unfortunately, that heart was threatened by a family history of high cholesterol. "Heart trouble runs in my family," he says. "My mother, my brother and my father all died of heart attacks, my mother at age 47. She was very young."

His own heart attack came at age 40.

"They gave me five stents and put me on all kinds of blood thinners, medications, you name it," he says. "It was a wake-up call. I wasn't really all that health-conscious up to that point, but now I thought it's time to make some changes."

Even though he was conscientious about his new regimen, his doctors were honest about their long-term efficacy.

"Diet can help, but the genetics... that's the real source of the problem," he says. "And I didn't have the greatest genetics."

After a small stroke in March of 2020, his doctor asked him about participating in a Mercy Research/Novartis clinical study administered by Mercy South physician Edward Coverstone. It didn't take much convincing.

"Oh, I was definitely on board," Alvin says. "I look at my own family history, and how their heart trouble impacted me, and I think about how my own health impacts my family, my three sons."



The new study was looking not only at lowering bad cholesterol, but identifying what made it bad in the first place.

"It was a brand-new thing," Alvin says. "This study was testing whether Lipoprotein A is the X-factor in what makes bad cholesterol bad."

Alvin was a perfect candidate for the study. "You had to have above a certain level of Lipo A to qualify," he says drily. "And I was well above it."

The two- to three-year study is currently ongoing.

"It's too soon to tell how it's all going to work out," Alvin says, but he's optimistic. "I give my blood every visit, I take my injections at home just as I'm instructed.

It's worth it. I love working with Mercy Research - all the nurses and staff have been great."

"I hope they can find whatever they're working on," he says. "I hope they're on the right track. I'd like a few more years to see my grandsons grow up. And there's still a lot I'd like to get done."

One of those things is a novel that occurred to him while discussing his experience with his wife one night on their deck. He started writing it earlier this year.

"I'm calling it 'Pieces of Clay,'" he says. "It's a story about people living in a small Midwestern town, and how all of our circumstances shape us, good and bad. Just an observation on how it all molds together, and how it all twists together."

He pauses, and then adds, "I've got a lot of material."