

# ‘A doctor may say remarkable – I would say miraculous’

**Supervisor Keir Whitson suffered a catastrophic heart attack last year and lived to tell of it**



BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER

▲ Keir Whitson and his wife, Susan, are pushing for the county to install guardrails to prevent cardiac deaths.

**BY BEN PETERS** | *Rappahannock News staff*

His last memory was parking his car at the airport in Prague, the Czech Republic’s capital, the morning of Sunday, July 24, four days prior to the heart attack.

Hampton Supervisor Keir Whitson, 53, had been staying in Europe since mid-June for a lengthy work trip and was returning to the United States to visit his mother in a Wisconsin town

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## WHITSON

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near Milwaukee after his wife, Susan Whitson, sent word that his mom was seriously ill.

He has no recollection of flying back to America. He doesn't remember reuniting with his family nor visiting his mom in the hospital. He also does not recall sharing a photo on Facebook after taking his two kids out on a pontoon boat the day before the heart attack. "Wisconsin summers are the best," the post dated July 27 said.

And he doesn't remember the heart attack itself. When he emerged from a medically induced coma more than a month later in late August he thought it was winter, specifically New Year's Eve and the nurses were headed out to parties. He had dreams of feeling cold, with visions of ice and people opening doors while wind blew flurries of snow inside. He experienced retrograde amnesia, according to a doctor close to him, which is not uncommon for someone who has endured a traumatic event, Keir said.

"It really was a mind bender," he said. "To lose all those memories is pretty crazy."

He couldn't talk when he awoke because of the tracheostomy tube in his throat to help with breathing, so he was given a board with letters and a pointer to spell out what he wanted to say. It had been 45 days since he took a sip of water through his mouth. Using the pointer, he asked the doctor when he could drink his favorite mineral water, Gerolsteiner. "That's when I knew his brain was OK," Susan said.

## JULY 28, 2022

## The heart attack

It began as a normal day. They went to the grocery store and a Starbucks, but Keir mentioned he wasn't feeling well. Susan said they largely ignored his symptoms because they were so focused on the health of his mother (who ultimately was OK). "It's very hard to talk about still," she said of that day, holding back tears.

His arm was aching in pain, but they wrote it off as muscle fatigue after a day out on the lake riding jet skis. Then the pain moved into his jaw. "It's just classic symptoms that I never even put two and two together," Susan said. They also noticed his hands exhibiting an unusual color and determined it was time to pay a visit to the emergency room. Before leaving, Keir showered and Susan could hear him vomiting in the bathroom of his parent's home while she waited downstairs.

"He went into the bedroom and I thought he was throwing up again ... I was downstairs and I grabbed a trash bag and I went up and he was on the bed convulsing," she said. "I didn't know it was a heart attack or what. I was trying to get a pulse, but my pulse was racing so hard, so I just started CPR and I saw his phone right there on the bed - he had obviously been looking at it - and I called 911, but I was yelling for the children. The children were right there coming into the room when it happened."

She had no formal CPR training, relying only on what she'd seen on television to guide her. In less than five minutes a first responder arrived and was led upstairs by their children. They helped Susan get Keir on the floor, then another responder took over the CPR. Keir was down without a pulse, being defibrillated.

"The fact was, we were in a place where we got an immediate response time," Susan said.

It's believed that Susan performing bystander CPR immediately, keeping his circulation going,

and EMS arriving so quickly is what ultimately saved Keir's life with his vital organs intact. "Even though everything went to almost perfection, it still was a dire situation. And that's very sobering," Keir said.

Given Rappahannock County's sparse geography and relatively lengthy EMS response times relative to suburban areas like where they were situated in Wisconsin, Keir and Susan have taken to exploring how officials could help save

*"I was trying to get a pulse, but my pulse was racing so hard, so I just started CPR..."*

SUSAN WHITSON

on her reaction after finding her husband convulsing

more lives in the event of cardiac emergencies.

They hope to make CPR training widely available and deploy across the county AEDs, or automated external defibrillators, which are portable devices that deliver an electric shock through the chest to the heart that can potentially stop an irregular heartbeat and allow a normal rhythm to resume following sudden cardiac arrest. County administration is currently seeking grant funding to supply county churches and businesses with the devices.

He was taken by ambulance from his parents' house to the local hospital where he was stabilized, intubated and then transferred 20 minutes to Milwaukee Froedtert Hospital & the Medical College of Wisconsin, a level 1 trauma center nationally recognized for cardiac care.

Doctors brought him into the heart catheterization lab where metal stents were placed inside him to open up clogged arteries. But during that surgery he slipped into cardiogenic shock, with his heart struggling to function on its own. It was deemed serious enough to put him on extracorporeal membrane oxygenation, or ECMO, a heart and lung life support system where he would remain for six days.

"The surgeons who briefed me that night were very clear that it was very uncertain if [Keir] would live or die," Susan said. "I made the decision that night to take the children and see Keir because I didn't want that last image to be what they had [seen] back at the house."

## AUG. 29, 2022

## The awakening

Susan, who had served as press secretary to First Lady Laura Bush, and the kids lived in a hotel room near the hospital for nearly a month before moving into the home of a friend she knew through the Bush White House. When the school



BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER

## Family photos in the Whitson's Harris Hollow home.

year started, their kids, ages 11 and 13 at the time, attended Wakefield School in The Plains remotely from Wisconsin.

"Even though it was a terrible situation, as a mom I just wanted them to have some sense of normalcy ... I didn't want them to look back on this being just a horrible thing, whether he lived or died," Susan said. The kids, who were displaced from home in Rappahannock for nearly three months, are holding up well despite the trauma, she said.

After Keir was taken off life support, they thought he was improving. That was until he got hit with a series of infections, which







**Whitson returned to Wisconsin to take the West Bend Fire Department EMS team members he credits with saving his life out to lunch.**

WEST BEND FIRE DEPARTMENT VIA FACEBOOK

➔ kept him in the ICU for longer. Doctors feared severe brain damage. And for more than a month Susan was living hour to hour, minute to minute.

“I was possibly faced with some very difficult decisions about what to do about his life if he did not have his brain intact,” she said. “One day, I had just prayed that morning, I was like, ‘Lord, please don’t let me make this decision. I mean, you make this decision for me.’” There was a moment where his blood pressure dropped dangerously low and they feared it might be the end.

It wasn’t until Aug. 29 that Susan went in and saw Keir awake for the first time. Despite it all, doctors discovered when he was taken off life support that neither his heart nor brain suffered damage. “A doctor may say remarkable – I would say miraculous,” Susan said of the news.

Still, he suffered from circulatory failure, respiratory failure, and kidney failure and was on dialysis all day, every day. He was also on mechanically assisted breathing for all of August and much of September, which doctors don’t want patients on for more than 10 days, Susan said.

Keir said when he awoke he experienced feelings of “euphoria,” like he was ready to return to normal life despite several vital organs failing. Meanwhile, Susan still wasn’t sure he was going to survive. She became more certain she wouldn’t lose her husband in October when he was sent to physical therapy in Milwaukee where he remained until later that month.

## SEPT. 26, 2022

### The unexpected return to politics

Soon after the attack, Susan made a call to Wakefield Supervisor and Chair Debbie Donehey to ensure continuity of government with Keir absent. “She was so gracious,” Susan said of Donehey. “She would keep me informed. She checked on us. But

*“Because I give people the benefit of the doubt, I wasn’t going to conclude that they were taking advantage of me.”*

KEIR WHITSON

on his colleagues blocking last fall’s broadband payment

she also tried to insulate us from anything if there was anything significant,” so as not to stress them out.

He had been out of the ICU for about a week when he started turning back to Rappahannock politics. News of his condition was scant in the early weeks of his absence while he missed several public meetings, including the Board of Supervisors, Broadband Authority and Planning Commission.

His former press secretary wife maintained a tight grip on the flow of information related to her husband’s health. Serving as his de-facto spokesperson, she in mid-August released a statement providing the community confirmation that he suffered a heart attack while rumors about him back home swirled. The exact state of his health remained largely unclear to the public for many months.

So long as he lived, he would have remained a member of the Board of Supervisors unless he stepped down or residents in his district successfully petitioned the circuit court for him to be removed from office, which did not occur.

He at no point considered resigning. Susan said they lacked the emotional bandwidth to even consider that. “He’s trying to sleep comfortably. I mean, there’s just so much physically that you’re dealing with, and then emotionally trying to wake up and comprehend what’s happening ... we couldn’t even go there at that point.” Keir agreed. As to whether he runs for re-election this year, Keir

remains undecided.

Many Rappahannock residents at the time showed an outpouring of support for Keir and his family on social media. Political opponents also made kind comments about him while he was away. “He was always very involved, articulating his opinions and that of his constituents,” Jackson Supervisor Ron Frazier said of Keir in September. “So, that’s not there. Obviously we’re at a deficit for not having a valuable colleague not able to participate.”

Susan had been selectively briefing Keir on happenings she read about in the Rappahannock News that she thought he cared about, namely broadband expansion, which he had championed for years.

Then in September, the Broadband Authority was

unable to convene after Piedmont Supervisor Christine Smith and Frazier did not attend a scheduled meeting, jeopardizing a contract to expand internet access and blocking the county’s ability to fulfill its financial obligation.

Keir, who continued his recovery in Wisconsin at the time, did not attend the Sept. 19 meeting, leaving the body without a tie-breaking vote needed to approve a critical payment related to broadband expansion.

“I anticipated people would be even jockeying politically,” Susan said. “And I saw that, which was really quite disheartening. But I’ve worked in politics – it’s not surprising.”

Smith and Frazier were accused by Donehey and others of taking advantage of Whitson’s health emergency to block the payment, and, in effect, broadband expansion.

When he was starting to feel better, Susan mentioned to him a critical broadband vote was upcoming. The morning of the Sept. 26 Broadband Authority meeting, Keir in a statement to media broke his silence for the first time since the heart attack and vowed to return to county government. Then, that night he unexpectedly joined the meeting by Zoom – the first public appearance he had made since July that drew an ovation from members of the public in attendance.

“It probably seemed more dramatic than it was,” he said. “It really was not easy to kind of get it together. I mean, I didn’t feel great. The idea of like sitting and participating in a lengthy meeting and being engaged at that point was still very much a challenge. And, you know, not that I was anywhere close to getting back to normal, but it was nice to be engaged again, instead of just being in survival mode.”

“Because I give people the benefit of the doubt, I wasn’t going to conclude that they were taking advantage of me,” Keir said of his colleagues blocking the broadband payment. “I think that would be kind of self-centered ... As to them not showing up for the meeting, I don’t know why they didn’t. Needless to say, after going to all the effort to join it, I was disappointed they were not there.”

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**FEB. 20, 2023**

## The re-telling

Keir wouldn't return to Rappahannock from Wisconsin until the final days of October, nearly five months after he had left over the summer for his work trip to Europe.

"As I'm more distanced from the trauma of what I endured, I've come to a place where I really appreciate the experience overall and I'm grateful for the experience," he said during a Feb. 20 interview in the kitchen of their Harris Hollow home. "I was able to witness and benefit from the power of prayer, from friends, from unbelievable EMS professionals."

"Nine out of 10 people can't experience sudden cardiac death and then live to tell about it or live to think about it," Keir said.

While he's not had any lasting post traumatic stress or other severe mental health challenges, he still becomes emotional talking about what he endured. He's been reading books, trying to find something or someone who can describe what he experienced in a familiar way.

The attack left Keir with a newfound perspective on life. He's trying to no longer sweat the small things and instead focus on the big picture. "I believe I'm a nice, more patient person," he said.

Keir also has a newfound appreciation for EMS and medical workers. He said he was looked after by between 80 and 100 caregivers at the ICU over the course of his stay. "To see that the complexity of all that working so effectively then benefiting



BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER

*"Nine out of 10 people can't experience sudden cardiac death and then live to tell about it or live to think about it."*

**KEIR WHITSON**

pictured with his wife Susan

from it is really humbling and astounding," he said. They returned to Wisconsin to take out to lunch the EMS team members who they credit with saving his life.

As for the cost of all his treatment, Keir and Susan estimate it's likely hundreds of thousands of dollars. "I'm keenly aware we are

very privileged in the fact that we have good health care," Susan said. Thanks to insurance, the couple said they don't have to worry about the cost.

"I really thought about people who are not in that position and how truly catastrophic and life changing something like this could be, aside from the medical side, which is a financial disaster," Keir said. "And that's really hard to think about."

In the lead-up to the attack, Keir believed he was healthy and living an active lifestyle, but had a family history of severe cardiac issues, wasn't watching his cholesterol levels and had gotten out of the habit of regularly seeing a primary care doctor. At one point he had been taking medication to control cholesterol, but stopped years ago.

"Even though I knew in the back of my mind I had high cholesterol, I kind of felt invincible because I go out and ski and do all these things," Keir said. "So I never really worried about my health."

He and Susan hope to encourage residents to make regular physician visits a normal part of their life and manage cholesterol if it's high. "It's too dangerous not to," he said.

And while they live just outside the Town of Washington, relatively close to a fire and rescue station, they're concerned for families out in the county's more remote hollows who are even farther from rescue. "You want them to be able to have a chance," Susan said.

"I've struggled a lot being back here, knowing how remote we are," she said. "I love our community, love where we live, but it's hard to go through something like that."

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