

## TAMPA BAY NEWSPAPERS (July 26, 2007)

### Grabbing a life line saves retired Air Force colonel

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Photo by JIM HARRINGTON

Donald Spearel and his wife, Ellen.

CLEARWATER – Halfway across the country, retired Col. Donald Spearel stood in front of a crowd of Air Force personnel and gave them what he believed was lifesaving advice. It was advice one man would personally thank him for.

Just six weeks before the November 2003 Air Force reunion, the Clearwater resident lay in a bed in the intensive care unit. A doctor had performed surgery to save Spearel from an aneurysm measuring 5.5 centimeters wide.

The 78 year old said a screening spotted the problem that could have led to his death.

“My wife Ellen and I saw an ad in the newspaper for a Life Line screening. That’s when they found the aneurysm.”

According to [www.medlineplus.gov](http://www.medlineplus.gov), aneurysms can cause a stroke if they burst in the brain. Aneurysms in other parts of the body can, if big enough, burst and cause bleeding or death. If an aneurysm is detected early enough, a doctor can often keep it from bursting.

Spearel said he had no symptoms before the testing detected the aneurysm and didn’t feel ill.

“I would never have known I had a problem if I hadn’t had the screening,” Spearel said. He said he and Ellen both signed up for the series of tests just to be sure they didn’t have anything to worry about.

“I’d be dead now and would have never known if I hadn’t done it,” he said. Some doctors say the “best defense against these lethal blood vessel bulges is early diagnosis” and recommend men have an ultrasound examination to look for aortic aneurysms starting at the age of 60. Researchers don’t know why, but more men have aneurysms than women. Often, people don’t even recognize when the worst has happened.

Some dismiss the warning signs of a stroke because they can fade away. On the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke Web site, warning signs of a stroke are listed as:

- Sudden numbness or weakness of face, arm or leg, especially on one side of the body
- Sudden confusion, trouble speaking or understanding
- Sudden trouble seeing in one or both eyes
- Sudden trouble walking
- Dizziness, loss of balance or coordination
- Sudden severe headache with no known cause

You can find more information as well as other warning signs on [www.ninds.nih.gov](http://www.ninds.nih.gov).

Stroke is the third leading cause of death in the United States according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Despite the statistics, Kerry Heffernan with Life Line Screening said vascular tests aren't as well-known as other screenings.

"They know about breast cancer and prostate screenings, but vascular screening has probably never crossed their minds," Heffernan said.

Life Line Screening, as well as several other companies and doctor's offices, offers tests to detect stroke, cardiovascular disease and osteoporosis. Though it was four years ago, Spearel clearly remembers visiting his doctor for the checkup before the San Antonio reunion.

"I really wanted to make that reunion. I tried to be really upbeat when I saw my doctor," he said.

The doctor cleared Spearel for the trip, allowing him to give those colleagues his lifesaving tip.

"My words were: I know you guys are all over 50 so you ought to get Life Line Screening."

Spearel said he didn't have to wait long to see his advice bear fruit. "Less than one year later, I got a call from a friend in California. He said, 'I want to thank you for saving my life.'"

Spearel said his friend credits a similar screening with finding a life-threatening aneurysm before it was too late.

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