

‘Live like you’re dying’

Gilbreath keeps sharing faith, beating odds with heart condition

By Grace Thornton
The Alabama Baptist

You are going to die, and die very quickly.”

The words stung Sammy Gilbreath as he sat on the cardiologist’s table, wife and children gathered around him to hear the verdict that allowed no room for appeal.

His hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, a pre-existing condition, had become volatile. He had that, plus a blood clot, an aneurism and a heart attack. No one but Gilbreath had ever survived that combination before, and he probably wouldn’t for much longer, the cardiologist said.

But what struck a deeper chord than the grim news about Gilbreath’s heart was the nurse standing nearby, tears rolling off her face without inhibition. Gilbreath reached out and grabbed her hand. “It’s OK,” he said. “If I wasn’t a Christian, it wouldn’t be OK. But there are things worse than death.”

Gilbreath, director of evangelism for the State Board of Missions (SBOM), might call the moment he received that news a defining moment in his life. But those close to him say rather that it was definitive, a beautiful snapshot of what every moment of Gilbreath’s life is about — sharing his faith.

“He amazes me with his strength and courage,” said daughter Brynn Gilbreath. “His dream is to live out his life following the path God laid out for him when he was just a 10-year-old boy — winning the lost for Christ.”

Gilbreath had known for years he had hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, a disorder in which the heart muscle is so strong it does not relax enough to fill the heart with blood. It had never caused problems.

But in 2004, Gilbreath was in the thick of finalizing material and training leaders for Intentional Evangelism, Alabama’s outreach focus for 2005–2007, when his doctors noticed during his yearly physical that things with his heart weren’t “quite right.”

Beating death

A few tests later the verdict was clear — he could die at any moment. A transplant was necessary. For Gilbreath to survive until he could get a new heart, doctors must surgically implant a device to jump-start his heart should it quit without warning. But if they attempted that surgery, doctors said he more than likely would never come off the operating table.

“It was very bleak news,” Gilbreath said. “The chances in surgery were not good, but

surgery was the only chance we had.”

He took the chance.

A barrage of prayers later, the 56-year-old’s heart was beating away with its new recharging apparatus — a defibrillator. He came through the surgery beautifully.

“I joke with everyone around here that my heart can jump-start a battery or pump up a tire,” he said, grinning.

As he waits for a heart transplant, living with “sudden death syndrome” hasn’t stifled Gilbreath’s humor or vigor for life, say friends and family — if anything, it’s driven his zest for life and ministry to a new level.

“He absolutely has the most positive spirit I have ever witnessed in a fellow minister,” said Rick Lance, SBOM executive director. “When the news of his health concerns came to the forefront, he took the situation in stride. He poured his energies into his ministry like never before.”

Staring death in the face changes your attitude about everything, Gilbreath said. “It makes each day a blessing.

And while I know the prognosis, I’m making plans like I’ll be here just like I always have.”

Over the past few weeks, he’s put more than 2,000 miles on his car, led four or five Intentional Evangelism conferences and preached five or six times a week.

“The urgency is even more pronounced to share my faith and equip more pastors and laypeople to do the same,” he said. “If I wake up in the morning, I get to go preach or teach, and if I don’t, I get to go home. I can’t lose.”

Is this any different from pre-diagnosis Gilbreath? Not really, say friends and family. He’s known for buying Harleys just to share his faith with bikers and for parachuting out of airplanes at youth events.

He’s also known for strength that testifies to his faith at the least likely moments — such as with the nurse who wept with the Gilbreaths as he learned of his condition.

“I believe God blesses my father’s commitment to Him,” Brynn Gilbreath said. “It is with great humility that my father receives the recognition he gets. He knows that it’s all by the grace of God. I love my dad. He may or may not be there to walk me down the aisle or to see his grandchildren. But none of that stops him from living his life carrying out the mission to which God has called him.”

Her dad has lived a full life — a blessed life, she explained. “He gets to wake up every morning and do what he loves until he is exhausted, go to bed and get up to do it again.”

Brynn, 22, and her brother Barrett, 24, are

not strangers to her father’s constant focus on preparing others for the future.

“We encouraged them (Barrett and Brynn) to dream spiritual as well as physical dreams,” Gilbreath said. “Achieving their goals and pursuing their passions puts them in new territory to share their faith.”

Like Brynn’s new territory in Edison, N.J., where in 2004 she became the youngest owner of a Chick-fil-A franchise in the nation — the first ever to work her way up from cleaning bathrooms to running the business. And on Sundays, she’s helping start a new church.

Or Barrett’s new ministry with Cap Gemini, a healthcare information technology company. “My dad has always given me guidance and supported me in whatever I do,” he said.

Barrett said after the diagnosis the family went out to eat to discuss their options and dreams. “My dream is for Dad to perform my wedding, but I didn’t tell them that night,” he said. “A couple of weeks later I bought the ring and came home to show Dad.”

Gilbreath fought tears when he heard his son’s decision. Barrett proposed to Ashley Freeman about a month later. His dad plans to marry the two July 23.

“If I had to express my feelings in one word, it would be gratitude,” said Carol Gilbreath, Sammy’s wife. “The impact of Sammy’s health issues on our family has been a personal peace for us individually. Christ is in control of each of our lives.”

Not promised tomorrow

The four have met with grief counselors, opened up about fears and hurts and put things on the table that could save pain in years to come. They have also worked out in advance financial matters that would have been an emotional hassle later.

“To the best of our ability, we’re dealing with it openly. We’re learning to laugh about some things now,” Gilbreath said. “When you’re at peace, you can insert humor without being disrespectful. You can laugh or be angry — you’re free to express how you feel.”

He said his peace came when the Lord revealed to him that his family would be given grace at the point of need, not in advance. “I wasn’t worried about me. No one’s promised tomorrow, and in that respect I’m not too different from anyone else.”

Gilbreath said when he preaches on the subject, he urges Christians to “live like they are dying” — because they are.

“I tell them, ‘Before you feel sorry for Sammy Gilbreath, realize that we’re all not long for this world,’” Gilbreath said. “I challenge them to get on that cardiologist’s table with me, have the doctor look them in the face and tell them they too will soon die. And I ask them — ‘How would you live differently?’”

