

# Tony C. Climbs From Death Valley

By STEVE MARANTZ

SALEM, Mass. — The miracle is taking place in Room 215 against a background of posters and potted plants and get-well cards.

Yesterday, Theresa Conigliaro held a newspaper in front of her son's face and he read of the rebirth of his dead brain. Tony Conigliaro's eyes comprehended the amazing truth. He nodded at his mother.

"It was beautiful," said Theresa Conigliaro. "I felt all along he would make it. With prayer. There have been so many prayers. And God heard."

Miracle is a word for mothers who are given back the life of their dying sons. It is not a word for physicians who define life by the blips on a machine. Dr. Max Kaulbach, Conigliaro's physician, was not comfortable talking about miracles yesterday.

In early March Conigliaro's father Sal and his brothers Billy and Richie walked away from Massachusetts General Hospital with the cold appraisal of medical science testing their faith. Tony lay there comatose two months after his heart attack.

"I have 40 years experience and I have never seen anyone come out of it when they've been without oxygen (during a heart attack) for 5-10 minutes," a doctor had told them.

The Conigliaros heard but they did not listen.

The family never did accept the apparent death of Tony's brain. They put him in the Shaughnessy Rehabilitation Hospital in Salem and they began a vigil of love. They talked to him believing he heard, and they sought remedies the physicians do not practice.

"We tried a Russian who supposedly has healing powers with his hands," said Billy. "We brought him in one night and he felt Tony wasn't going to show much of a recovery."

"We tried acupuncture. We had holistic healers for a couple of months."

More recently an osteopath started Tony on electronic therapy, sending electric impulses into his spine to stimulate the brain. A nutritionist started him on megavitamin therapy, feeding him large doses of 15 vitamins daily. Two weeks ago Tony's brain awakened, registering on a machine. The family sensed a breakthrough.

"What does it mean?" they asked the doctors.

"It doesn't mean that much," they were told.

"What do you mean?" they said.



CONIGLIARO

"It (brain scan) was almost flat in Boston."

"You have to go by his physical movements," said the doctors. "If he starts moving and talking he's getting better."

Billy brought some strawberry yogurt into Room 215 last Friday, put some on a spoon and held it to his older brother's lips. The yogurt disappeared, signalling the return of Tony's swallowing response.

The next day an attending nurse was astonished to hear a word rasp weakly from the lips. Theresa Conigliaro ran into the room and was greeted by her son. "Hi Mom," he whispered. The nurses on the floor cried and clapped while Theresa felt numb. "I was in shock," she said.

On Sunday there were more words and more head nods.

"We can ask him what he needs and wants and we can help him more that way," said Billy. One choice of Tony's was to watch the Red Sox on television. "I don't even know if I should show him the game because he was going to be the Channel 38 announcer," said Billy.

The doctors are not sure what brought about Conigliaro's partial recovery and they are cautious about what lies ahead.

But one abstraction medical science will concede is the mystery of the human spirit, that of life which is neither bone nor tissue but will. The same thing that enabled Tony Conigliaro to hit a baseball after nearly dying from being hit in the head by one.

It was not too terribly unscientific for the doctor to suggest that the collective will of the Conigliaro family had an effect.

The good fight continued Tuesday. Tony was taken for the first time to a physical therapy room and laid on a mat.

Tony talked to his mother and said "Ouch" when Billy pinched him. Later, he tried to move his hands to catch a ball tossed at him by Billy.

Billy recalled asking his brother if the ball bothered him.

"He nodded his head," said Billy.

"He wanted to try it."

The spirit soars, even as the body lies limp. The man who once roamed the outfields of major league baseball is climbing out of the valley of death.

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