

The Art of Intervention: *Finding Health*

in Faith | BY HEATHER LANGLEY



2.5-mile Coyote Creek Trail, on the grounds of the Weimar Institute

A blizzard, a stalled car, a lost wallet, and a cop. Talk about divine intervention. Kent Rich is the first to say this seemingly unfortunate sequence of events, among others, helped save his life.

At age 68, Kent Rich has a contagious zest for life. He talks in a friendly, unencumbered manner, pausing every so often to reign in his emotions. "I was coming home

from an art show in Colorado," says Rich. "I had a bad fever, and I was driving in a blizzard. Then my car died under a freeway overpass."

Rich was driving back from a solo art exhibition in Denver, Colorado, to his home in Salt Lake City, Utah. Battling sickness, his car conveniently stalled under the freeway where he was protected from the raging storm. Several minutes later, a policeman arrived.

"When he asked me for my license, I realized I had left my wallet and my planner at a restaurant," says Rich, chuckling. "Also in that planner was a diamond necklace I had bought for my wife." The policeman soon realized Rich was very ill and called for an ambulance. Before long, Rich found himself in a Rock Springs, Wyoming, hospital, where he was held for two weeks and diagnosed with pneumonia.

"My wife got very worried when she hadn't heard from me," says Rich. "But she finally got a call from a man in Colorado who said, 'I've got a wallet and a diamond necklace that I found in a restaurant, and I'll do whatever I can to return them to you.' When does that happen? That was when I realized that God was intervening."

Rich, a retired psychiatric social worker, continued to battle pneumonia over the course of that winter in 1998. He weighed upwards of 350 pounds and struggled with diabetes, breathing problems, and congestive heart failure. He had already experienced one heart attack.

"I was hospitalized seven more times the following year for severe pneumonia," says Rich. "I had to be on oxygen to work."

In 1994, Rich retired from his private practice in psychiatric social work after 35 years of working in the field to pursue his passion for the arts. An accomplished musician, Rich fell naturally into photography and, later, painting. His friends claimed he had a "natural eye" for art, and though he had no formal training, he soon found himself

in gallery shows and museums across the nation, including the Springville Museum of Art, Brigham City Museum, Utah Museum of Fine Art, and the Colorado Telluride Jazz Celebration.

"I take my art very seriously, and I work very hard at it," says Rich. "But I was also under a lot of pressure."

Rich claims he was given a series of divine messages over the course of that year. Weeks later, Rich unknowingly found himself painting a flock of chickens that belonged to his chief nurse at St. Mark's Hospital in Salt Lake City, where he had been hospitalized for a failed angioplasty in 1999. His artery had ruptured during the procedure and had caused dangerous complications.

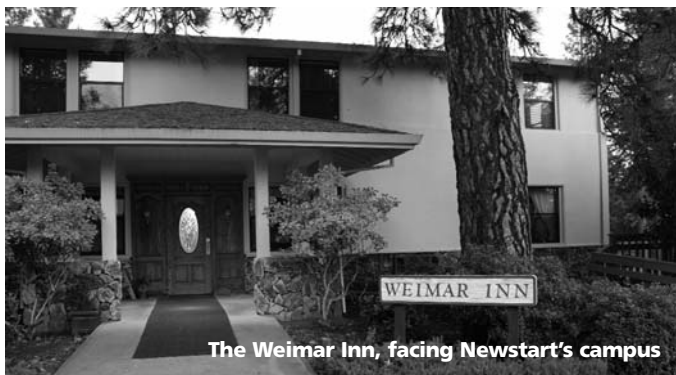
"[The nurse] recognized me and said, 'You're Kent Rich, aren't you? Do you know how close you were to dying?'" Rich pauses. "She held up her index finger and her thumb, pinched them together. She told me, 'You were this close.'"

"I was a stubborn patient, and I was in denial," says Rich. "But when she told me that, it shook me. No one had ever told me I almost died. You can account for a lot of things, but miracles do happen—that was my first wake-up call."

Rich sought out his old cardiologist Dr. Adgei Mike Pocu, a Seventh-day Adventist who several years prior had



Hand-crafted walking sticks



The Weimar Inn, facing Newstart's campus



Newstart cafeteria and dining facility

recommended that Rich attend the Adventist-run Newstart Program in Weimar, CA. A health retreat designed specifically for patients with diabetes, Newstart would help Rich change his dietary habits and provide him with the necessary physical and spiritual support to get healthy.

"Initially, when Dr. Pocu told me about Newstart, I kicked up all kinds of resistance," says Rich. "I thought I could lose the weight on my own if I made my mind up. I didn't want to go to a so-called 'fat farm.'" Yet Rich's recent series of unfortunate events had changed his perspective. He got back in touch with Dr. Pocu and scheduled an appointment to once again discuss his health.

"During that appointment, Dr. Pocu got right up in my face," recalls Rich. "He asked me, 'Kent, are you going to live, or are you going to die? It's your choice.'"

Dr. Pocu explained to Kent that unless he began to undertake some serious measures, he wasn't going to live much longer. "He told me that if he put me on an operating table, I would die," says Rich. "He told me, 'So you're going to go to Weimar and you're going to [get



Fountain on Newstart campus



Weimar trailhead at Moses Rock

healthy] the hard way.”

Weimar’s Newstart Program is ranked number two in the nation for weight-loss among its patients. During an 18-day retreat in the Sierra Nevada foothills, attendees learn and practice a crucial eight-part health regime of a whole-plant vegan diet, exercise, water and air intake, rest, and temperance. In addition, Newstart provides daily physician’s lectures, vegan cooking classes, and hydrotherapy to its patients. In the fall of 2005, Rich joined its ranks.

Dr. Mike Olrich and Dr. Richard Lukens were two of Rich’s personal Newstart physicians during his time in Weimar. Lukens recalls Rich’s good attitude and amiable demeanor, and his ability to keep with the program when others didn’t. “With many patients, the biggest setback is trying to work around the diet so that they can still eat the foods they like,” says Lukens. “Kent was someone who really kept with [the program].”

With a BMI of 54 and a prescription for nine medications, Rich made respectively significant gains over the course of three weeks. He dropped some weight and two medications and started walking on a regular basis. Yet despite these benefits, Rich still struggled with his health. He learned that along with his diabetes, his kidneys had

begun to fail. He went home with slight improvements, but none big enough to save him.

“At the end of my time there, they found out I was an artist,” says Rich. “They offered me a deal.” That deal turned out to be yet another divine intervention for Rich. Upon learning of his artistic talent, they proposed that Rich come back to Weimar for a longer stay to paint for them. If he created artwork for their permanent collection, they’d subsidize the program costs.

“I realized I couldn’t turn down the offer,” says Rich, “as long as they allowed me to bring my dog.” Three weeks and a dog later, Newstart had worked out a compromise with Rich. He was to paint the grounds of Newstart, and they were to help him get healthy.

“I was there for eight months,” says Rich. Those eight months were nothing short of life-altering for Rich. Fighting through bouts of gout, depression and another hospitalization, Rich managed to turn his health around. By the end of the program, Rich was walking five miles a day and had reversed his kidney failure, high cholesterol, and diabetes.

“Kent is definitely our poster-boy,” declares Lukens. Yet the most important gains Rich made at Newstart were

healthy habits. Staying with the vegan diet and exercise routine, Rich learned he could continue the program beyond Weimar. When his eight months at Newstart were over, Rich moved back to Salt Lake City where he continued his own healing through addiction awareness, dieting, walking, and of course, art.



“I couldn’t have had better emotional therapy as well as physical,” says Rich of his time at Newstart. “I got to paint every day. I formed a string quintet. I became friends with a lot of Adventists and got to know

some theologians really well. I got to talk to them about God’s intervention in my life.” Rich pauses, overcome with emotion. “I had never before had a therapist or doctor who would pray with me, who would talk to me about God’s hand in my health.”

Rich claims that, thanks to Newstart, he became an “adventurer.” He continued to lose weight by walking the southwest corner of Utah, the Mormon Trail, and 250 miles in Utah’s Uinta Mountains, among others—all while contin-



Three pastels by Kent Rich:
Veggie Cocktail, Chapel in the Woods,
and Library in the Snow

uing to draw, paint and photograph his surroundings. In 2008 Rich hit a landmark weight of 160 pounds, and he's kept it that way. He hasn't had diabetes for six years. And he's still around to create his artwork and tell his story.

Rich reflects over the past decade of his life with tears choking his voice. "It's been quite a journey, and there were multiple places where God intervened," says Rich. "But I also had to keep my focus—I had to pick a place up ahead and walk towards it without looking down. In this way, I've walked right out of death."

Rich continues to walk an average of ten miles a day, make art, and play music in a string quintet. He currently teaches private art students and group classes at the Peterson Art Center in Salt Lake City and in his own studio. "If you have hope, you get a vision of what you want to happen," says Rich. "But you also have to realize you can't do it all by yourself. God is always present, and when you realize that you're not alone in the healing process, having that faith is a power that creates things." ■

Heather Langley is the editorial assistant at *Spectrum* magazine.

To see Kent Rich's artwork, resume and contact information, please visit his website and online portfolio at <http://kentrich.com>

