

Script – Print – After the fire

A year ago, Eric Cunningham's life flashed before his eyes.

Cunningham was injured when a controlled brush fire in the backyard of his Byron, Illinois, home quickly got out of control. His t-shirt and right arm immediately caught on fire. His wife, Ginnie, was running errands, so his teenage children, Olivia and David, rushed to help their dad.

"My kids were the ones who triaged me," he said. "My daughter called 911 and my son helped keep my arm cooled off with water. When my wife got home, I was transferred by ambulance to OSF."

"He really couldn't talk, he was just standing in the garage and knew he needed a lot of help," recalls Ginnie.

As Cunningham was being treated in the emergency department at OSF HealthCare Saint Anthony Medical Center, Ginnie had many questions for Stathis Poulakidas, MD, the medical director at the hospital's burn center. She wanted reassurance that her husband would receive the best possible care.

The Regional Burn Unit at OSF Saint Anthony is the only burn center in northern Illinois and one of five in the state of Illinois. The unit treats more than 200 burn victims per year with specialized treatments, burn reconstructive surgery and rehabilitation therapy services.

"I felt immediately like a weight had been lifted off of me," Ginnie says, "and that I didn't have to worry about being in the right place and that he was where he needed to be, and he would be taken care of."

Dr. Poulakidas says it's completely normal for patients and loved ones to have an array of emotions after such a traumatic injury.

"The psychological support that he needs is equally as important as the physical support that we give, from the surgical standpoint, wound care standpoint and the therapy standpoint," he says. "You're totally normal one moment and now, you have this bad injury and that makes an impact."

Cunningham suffered second and third degree burns on 20% of his body. He had surgery to transfer skin from his leg to his badly burned arm. He also endured difficult treatments including a daily cleansing and debridement of his skin. Debridement is the medical removal of dead, damaged or infected tissue to improve the healing potential of the remaining healthy tissue.

After the initial shock wore off, Cunningham says the pain kicked in. He was extremely concerned that he would suffer permanent damage from his accident.

"The thing that really sticks in your head every day is that process of having your wounds scraped to get all the dead and old material off and then getting that redressed," he says. "And as that got more intense, pain medicine helped. About five days into my stay, I had surgery for the skin graft."

Cunningham spent 16 days in the burn unit. Then he had home care for a month followed by outpatient therapy.

But despite the pain, Cunningham says he was comforted by the care both he and his family received from the staff at OSF Saint Anthony. Ginnie spent 13 or more hours each day at his bedside.

"Every time they came in to bring him water, they asked me if I wanted water," Ginnie says. "I felt like I was as much of a patient sometimes as he was. They really helped me process the trauma of what had happened."

Cunningham, who is vice president of Collins Aerospace, was away from work for three months recuperating before he was able to return. While he still wears a wrap on his right hand, he says he's feeling better and now lives life with a grateful attitude. He's also willing to share his harrowing story with others.

"What did I learn specifically from that? And how do I potentially help other people who are going through similar challenges – whether they're bigger or smaller," he says.

Dr. Poulakidas says burn injuries will change a person forever. But many of those patients are resilient, which helps them rebound sooner and adjust to a new normal.

"That's really why I fell in love with (treating) burns," he says. "These patients are some of the most grateful, most caring and most thankful patients that you'll ever encounter."

For more information on burn injuries care at OSF Saint Anthony, visit [OSF HealthCare](#).

Sidebar

Fall is the season for raking leaves, chilly nights and bonfires. That's why it's important to remember a few safety tips to keep you, your family and friends safe during the next few months.

- Always keep a bonfire at least 25 feet away from any structure.
- Don't use gasoline or other flammable liquids to start a fire. Instead, use sticks or newspapers.
- Never leave a fire unattended.
- Always keep a bucket of water or shovel and sand nearby to put out a fire when you're done.
- Make sure the fire is completely out before you leave the site.
- Never burn debris or leaves on dry, windy days.
- Don't burn large piles of debris. Instead, burn small piles and add to a pile only as it burns down.