

Heart attack survivor abseils hospital with Epsom NHS daughter

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A heart attack survivor has abseiled down the side of St Helier Hospital with his daughter, an occupational therapist at Epsom Hospital, to raise money for the charity supporting both hospitals.

Sutton-based Fred Mendonca, 62, and his daughter Sarah Beard, 30, took on the 125-foot drop at St Helier Hospital ahead of Father's Day weekend. The descent is roughly equivalent to the heel-to-crown height of the Statue of Liberty.

Sarah works in the Mary Seacole Unit at Epsom Hospital, part of Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals NHS Trust. The unit provides inpatient frailty and rehabilitation services for some of the most vulnerable patients in the local community.

The father and daughter team joined more than 70 fundraisers taking part in the second annual Abseil St Helier event, which has already raised more than £20,000 towards Epsom and St Helier Hospitals Charity's £30,000 target.

For Fred, the challenge had a deeply personal meaning. In June 2024 he was at work when he felt chest pain which he initially thought was indigestion.

"I had no idea I had an arterial clot and was flabbergasted when the consultant said I had suffered an acute myocardial infarction — commonly known as a heart attack — and heart failure," he said.

"You think you're indestructible. It doesn't feel like your heart is under attack — it's all the surrounding muscles which end up aching. I tried to self-medicate. Fortunately, my wife called an ambulance which turned up within ten minutes. They hooked me up to an electrocardiogram and I was being treated in A&E within half an hour."

Fred was treated by emergency teams at St George's Hospital before receiving cardiac rehabilitation care at St Helier.

"What a phenomenal team, from the paramedics to the emergency and ward staff," he said. "They were highly professional, efficient, friendly and informative. You know immediately that you are in good hands. The cardiac rehabilitation staff at St Helier nursed me back to full health. Now I'm focusing on keeping fit and I feel better than I have done in the last 20 years.

"I feel like I've been given a new lease of life, and I had the go-ahead for the abseil with Sarah, which means the world to me. Our whole family is grateful for the support we've received from the hospitals and I'm happy to support this important cause."

Sarah has worked in community healthcare roles across Sutton and Surrey for more than eight years and is now based at Epsom Hospital.

She said the experience of her father's illness had brought home the life-saving work of NHS colleagues across the Trust.

"Most of our family was born in St Helier Hospital and the A&E is where all our family goes when we need urgent help, so they've looked after all of us, including my grandad who used to be a chaplain there," she said.

"When my dad was poorly, it really brought home the impact of the work my colleagues do to save lives. I can never be more grateful to them for giving my dad a second chance. My dad's choir often goes to sing for the patients at St Helier at Christmas, which he's been doing for the past 40 years, so we're always keen to show our gratitude for their exceptional care."

Sarah said the abseil was the first time either of them had attempted such a challenge.

"We've never abseiled before, so this is a new adventure for us," she said.

"My dad is a huge source of inspiration for me. He looks after everyone, he's extremely resilient and I know he's always there for us. He's so giving with his time — not just to his family, but to the whole community — so I'm very proud of him and I'm very lucky to be his daughter."

Money raised through the event will support Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals NHS Trust, helping to enhance patient care, support staff wellbeing and improve hospital environments.

Recent charity-supported projects include part-funding a state-of-the-art surgical robot, supporting staff recognition and long-service events, and improving maternity spaces including the maternity bereavement room and early pregnancy unit.

Molly Simpson, Head of Epsom and St Helier Hospitals Charity, said: “We are incredibly grateful to everyone taking part in this year’s abseil. It takes real courage to step over the edge at that height, but everyone is doing it to make a real difference for patients, families and NHS colleagues, and to support our hospitals’ life-saving care.

“Events like this help bring our community together. I wish all our abseilers the very best of luck and thank them for going above and beyond for our hospitals.”

Supporters can still donate to Fred, Sarah and others taking part in Epsom and St Helier Hospitals Charity’s Abseil St Helier event through the charity’s fundraising page.

Epsom and St Helier Hospitals Charity – Abseil St Helier

Sam Jones – Reporter

