

# Community comes together to help WWII vet achieve a goal



Rufus McClure and family

San Marco resident Rufus McClure was a paratrooper who served during WWII in a special division that was trained to invade Japan. "I was in Europe when President Harry Truman gave the orders to drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. After that, the war was over. Instead of getting shipped to Japan to possibly be killed, I got to go back to New York and party."

Following his military service, McClure attended college and then landed a teaching position in the English department at Bolles. He taught there for decades before his 2000 retirement. As a way to keep active when not in the classroom, McClure would walk Jacksonville's bridges. "I started doing it in

1998. Heaven knows how many times. It has to be in the thousands," he estimated.

But in the spring of 2021, McClure began experiencing shortness of breath. He turned to Baptist Health. Dr. Venkata Sagi determined the cause to be a faulty heart valve that wasn't opening correctly, which restricted proper blood flow. The solution, according to Dr. Ruby Satpathy, was a transcatheter aortic valve replacement, a minimally invasive procedure that avoids the need for open-heart surgery.

Following the procedure, McClure quickly left the hospital to begin his recovery and his participation in cardiac rehabilitation. He was doing so well that in late August he set a

goal to walk across the Acosta Bridge on September 24. He told the rehab staff, "There's no better day than my birthday." It would be his 97th. At 1,645 feet in length with a steep incline on each side, the Acosta would not easily be walkable for a 97-year-old recovering from a heart valve procedure. But McClure was determined.

Mary Condorodis, the rehab coordinator, vowed to walk with him, as did others from the team of professionals. "He has such amazing exercise ambitions. We all really stepped it up once he set the birthday goal and started making sure he was doing incline during his time on the treadmill to prepare," Condorodis said.

The walk plan had expanded to include some people from the AgeWell Center, and McClure invited family members to join them. They formed a crowd of nearly 30 who gathered at the bridge's base on the San Marco side. They commenced their climb to McClure's refrain, "Class is in session!"

McClure paused a moment halfway over for a few photos before approaching the descent. Aside from all the fanfare, there was something else very different about McClure's September bridge walk. His beloved wife, Mariam, wasn't by his side. She had passed away in December 2021; her funeral took place on the couple's 66th wedding anniversary. But as stated by Carolyn Stift, McClure's cardiac rehab therapist, "We knew she was there at the top of the bridge. She was there in spirit."

Awaiting on the Brooklyn side was a Jacksonville Fire and Rescue Department crew, honking an engine's horn in celebration.

The firemen offered McClure a ride back over the bridge in their truck. "Thank you, but I'll walk," was the reply of the determined McClure as he headed up the incline.

Cake, champagne, cowbells, and balloons greeted the walkers as they returned to the San Marco side, all in celebration of McClure's successful heart procedure, accomplishment of his goal, and his 97th birthday. "We have to come back next year for your 98th!" declared one of his sons. McClure agreed and is even considering crossing the Acosta again on his 100th birthday. But in the meantime, his new goal is to be the oldest person to walk the Fuller Warren Bridge pedestrian-friendly path once it opens. His cardiac rehab team is committed to helping him.

"You don't come across people like Rufus every day," said Condorodis. "I'm amazed by him."



Rufus McClure before his birthday bridge crossing



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