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Ride of a lifetime: Doctor fulfills patient's birthday wish

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Dr. Steven Spence not only saved the life of 91-year-old Eula Jeanette Johnson, seen in the passenger seat here waiting for him to get behind the wheel, he fulfilled her birthday wish to ride in a hot red sports car through her community.

--Contributed Photo

Local elder Eula Jeanette Johnson has never driven a car. Not many women did, back in her youth. She just never learned, never really wanted to. The Grand Ridge resident had her hands busy at home, for one thing, with six youngsters to raise. Her husband, Noah, drove the family everywhere they needed to go. And when he died about 30 years ago, their now-grown children took up the responsibility of getting her around. She never expressed a desire to drive, never spoke of a special love for the open road.

But then something happened. Johnson had a near-death experience at the age of 90. She got sick on Jan. 1 of this year, had to go into the intensive care emergency ward at Jackson Hospital. She spent the next 13 days in ICU, each day a question of whether she would live or die. At one point, daughter Sybil Cloud says, she was clinically dead, and she was in a coma for a time. Cloud and Johnson's other daughter, Jane Dykes, say God sent their mother a miracle in physician Dr. Steven Spence.

His around-the-clock care gave her a second chance at life, an opportunity to see her 91 st birthday after all. On Jan. 27, the day she turned 91, staff and family gave her a cupcake party at the hospital. But she didn't get her big birthday wish that day, and wouldn't get it for a good time later. What she wanted, she wasn't well enough to receive.

But Spence had been listening closely to his patient all along and knew what she wanted. He was determined to give it to her as soon as he could. She spent several months in physical therapy and rehab at the Courtyard by the Millpond/Signature Health Care after that close call and finally went home in May. Although she had lived alone for the 30 years since her husband's death, her children stay with her at home now as she continues to recover. They were there last Tuesday, the day Spence called to say he thought the birthday girl was ready for her special gift.

He'd be picking her up from home that Friday to take her for a spin. It had been her wish to ride through Grand Ridge in a little red sports car. Courtesy of Rahal Miller, Spence made that wish come true. He borrowed a bright red Camaro from the dealership. He and Johnson rode through Grand Ridge, Sneads, and Dellwood.

She was thrilled with the ride.

"It was wonderful," Johnson said. "We went through Grand Ridge and through Sneads, turned around, came back and went through Dellwood. I blew the horn once or twice. When I was so sick in the hospital and said that, I never dreamt that the doctor was listening to me. He's a wonderful doctor and a wonderful person."

Her daughters say they and their surviving brothers—Bruce and Clarence Wayne Johnson—are grateful for that wish fulfilled. And they might be convinced their deceased brothers Ducky and Blondie, and their father Noah, were smiling down on that cruise through the home community.

The grace of God, the skills of a gifted physician, caring hospital and rehab staffers, they say, worked together as pivotal forces to bring their mother back to them. The good doctor and a generous car dealer, they say, brought her back in style.