

Celebrating Their Health:
Colonoscopies Make For A Most Unusual Birthday Party
By Valerie Kuklenski, Staff Writer; U-Entertainment

Jack Merrick was drawing on the straw in his jumbo Scorpion cocktail with such gusto, it seemed the drink's floating gardenia would be vacuumed up.

Surrounded by old friends, good food, four anesthesiologists and two colorectal surgeons at Trader Vic's in Beverly Hills, Merrick had chosen a heck of a way to celebrate his 43rd birthday.

Like many birthday parties, this one had a theme. A medical theme. It was called Scope Fest 2007, and it involved eight 40-something guys who made a party weekend of getting colonoscopies.

"Interesting way to get back together, huh?" Don Chiesa, 40, said earlier that day as he waited his turn at the Specialty Surgery Center in Beverly Hills.

Merrick, a self-described "recovering lawyer" who now runs his own home health care company, says he is known for both his appetite for partying and his ability to hatch great ideas that die on his couch.

The idea for Scope Fest was sparked by a Newsweek article that described how deadly — and preventable — colon cancer is, and how resistant men typically are to dealing with doctors.

"We don't stop and ask for directions, and we don't go to a doctor unless there's a gun put to our head," Merrick said in the waiting room before his procedure. "So how in the world is anybody voluntarily going to go for a colonoscopy?"

"So I had this wacky idea. I thought, what if you could bundle a proactive diagnostic medical exam into a guys' party weekend? It would be a hall pass. It seemed like the wives would be packing the overnight bag, the kids would be waving and cheering you — thanks, Daddy! — and you're going to have a wild time and actually do something helpful and smart for your own well-being."

It could have been another one of those fizzled-out brainstorming sessions had he not met **Dr. Liza Capiendo**, a colorectal surgeon, at a physicians' gathering.

He pitched the "medi-spa weekend" concept to her, describing a block of appointments on a Friday morning followed by a weekend at a posh hotel with massages and maybe an awards dinner. She enthusiastically endorsed it and pressed him to book it in March, which is colorectal cancer awareness month.

He sent out about 50 e-mail invitations, many to his Columbia University fraternity brothers and roommates. "Some guys lost my number, some guys were e-mailing each other behind my back, saying I'd gone to the dark side.

"I got e-mails from wives saying what a brilliant idea," he added. "I have never gotten a letter like that from one of my buddies' wives, I assure you."

It was 12, then 10, then eight from San Diego, San Jose and points between who followed through on Merrick's proposal. The e-mails exchanged in the weeks leading up to Scope Fest were full of poop puns — think "brown is the new black" — and Merrick nicknames such as Jackson Polyp and Colon Bowel.

Then there was the Thursday night before the procedure.

"I sat in the bathroom and chugged laxatives on my birthday," Merrick said. "My sons brought me Jell-O with a candle in it. I had to explain to my 6- and 4-year-old why Daddy's in a cold sweat on the bathroom floor, naked."

Modern technology provided some consolation for the patients' misery during what Capiendo calls "the bowel prep."

"Imagine eight guys on the toilet sending text messages to each other," Merrick said. "From a moment of excruciating pain, I am laughing so loud reading text messages. Talk about male bonding. This is a really strange bonding experience."

While some used only the Demerol sedation that is commonly covered by insurance for the procedure, Merrick and a few others opted for general anesthesia for an extra \$250 out of pocket. "A mere bag of shells when you're talking about having your intestines probed, don't you think?" Merrick said.

The results: Three of the eight had polyps removed, and Merrick later boasted that his was the largest. "They had to use a special tool to remove it. They had to go to Home Depot and rent something," he joked.

Capiendo also reported one case of melanosis coli, which comes from frequent use of laxatives, and a couple with fairly common diverticulosis. Neither condition is serious, and they can be managed with more fiber in the diet, she said.

She said it was good that the polyps were removed, and that they were detected well before age 50, which is the American Cancer Society's recommended age for the first colonoscopy in someone without symptoms or a family history of colon cancer.

"Not all polyps become cancer, but cancers almost always start from a polyp," she said.

Capiendo later showed her good humor by accepting one of Merrick's "golden ram" awards and presenting one of her own: the "best ass" honor, which went to Philip Nevinny. She says the award was the nurses' idea, not Merrick's.

"For them it was a treat because it was a young guy," she said. "We usually see old, hairy, saggy behinds — on the men and the women!"

The guys reminisced about past Merrick parties, particularly the Sand Suck, when they lay belly-down on a beach and slurped mai tais from a pit. But they endorsed this new, grown-up twist on a weekend bash.

"I thought it was absolutely ridiculous and absolutely wonderful and a good thing," Nevinny said. "It's not only good for us, but for men and women in their 40s to raise awareness and really take charge of the issue. Perhaps these events will be sweeping the nation. They really ought to be."

Toward that goal, Merrick is hoping to launch scopefest.org, a nonprofit site to offer tips on organizing your own colonoscopy weekend.

He's sure he will be ribbed by his friends for a long time to come, but he's OK with that.

"To turn your colonoscopy into a media event is very Jack C. Merrick, according to some. But you know, this might just inspire some people to do something like this — maybe not with the alcoholic beverages and awards ceremony that we have planned later in the evening, but just to get it done."

It's not just the men who are giving him grief about Scope Fest. "All of my female friends have been laughing hysterically at what big babies we all are," he said.

And he doubts his wife, Margot, would seize the idea to initiate, say, a Mammogram-arama with the girls. "She's not an escapist like me. She's more responsible, more mature."

But that won't stop Merrick from brainstorming his next procedure party. That night, nibbling from the puupuu platter and glowing from that rum-based Scorpion, Merrick asked, "Would you be interested in following me to my vasectomy?"

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