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Dear Dr. DeSanctis,

Several months ago, Susan shared your letter of retirement with us and we had to write to wish you every happiness and contentment that you deserve. You have given so much to everyone else - not only your patients but their families as well. We know this as we were one of those families. You supported us during our heartaches and pains and gave us the strength to hope when no hope seemed possible. Now it is your time to rest and be happy with your family and care for yourself.

This is the story of our place in your life for which we will be forever grateful. The full impact came to us a few months ago while watching The Greatest Story Ever Told on TV. It is the story of Christ's birth, life, suffering and death with the Resurrection as the triumphant conclusion. We realized watching this we also have the greatest story of our life only because of you and the many other doctors that God has gifted us with.

When Susan was about 6 years old she had been cared for in St. Michael's Hospital and Beth Israel Hospital in Newark, NJ and Bethesda, MD. Her health began to fail fast as she suffered with a high temperature and brain abscesses. This is where your friend Dr. Leon Smith came into the picture. Brain surgery was done several times to drain the abscesses but Susan's condition continued to worsen and doctors in St. Michael's told us to "let her die in peace." We knew that as long as God gave her breath we would do all we could to hold on to her. This is when Dr. Smith told us that if anyone could help it was his friend at MGH, Dr. DeSanctis but it would be necessary for us to travel with Susan to Boston. As Susan received her First Holy Communion at the hospital, we committed to the journey.

During this time, we told Susan stories of St. Bernadette in Lourdes, France. Her Aunt brought her holy water and daily Susan used it with much faith. We told Susan if she got better we would take her to Lourdes. We kept our commitment when Susan was about 21 and loved every minute of our trip.

When we arrived in MGH, we saw many doctors including Dr. Ojemann. It was decided that a shunt was necessary but the surgeon was away and could not get back immediately because of snow. As it turned out, days later, her condition improved and no surgery was needed. You sent us back to New Jersey advising us to let Susan have whatever she wanted to eat, whenever she wanted; we needed to build her up because at this time she weighed only 26 pounds. We followed your advice over Thanksgiving, Christmas, and the New Year and then went back to MGH for her heart surgery performed by Dr. Austin.

Immediately after her surgery, Dr. Austin came to our room and told us Susan was a miracle child. You see, Susan had died on his table but he refused to accept it and fought for her life. And it also seemed that angels had been watching over him, as well. You see, he had an apparatus on his cardiac machine that he saw when he was working in Europe but he had never used it and had planned to remove it but never did. It was that apparatus that enabled him to calculate the amount of blood that Susan needed and brought her back to us. Dr. Austin told us he would recommend this apparatus on every machine because of this miracle.

During the time that Susan was in surgery, I was waiting in her room painting a picture of the Last Supper. I came to the face of Christ and suddenly began to cry uncontrollably. Unable to paint, Henry and I walked to the chapel behind the hospital and when I recovered we returned to the hospital. We realized later that this was the time that Susan had died on the operating table.

While Susan was in the ICU, she was so critical that the doctors told us, against the rules, to visit her any time we wanted for as long as we wanted. On the second or third day, we were told if the tubes extending from her body did not clear she would not recover. Henry and I went to Mass and prayed for the tubes to clear. When we returned to ICU, the liquid in the tubes was clear, as if someone had cut and drained out all the bleeding. The doctor staying with her told us that Susan would be fine and claimed it was a miracle.

Susan came home. During one of her checkups, she told you that it felt as if something had "popped" in her chest. You discovered that a stitch had opened and she was bleeding and needed immediate surgery. Again, your care and gifted knowledge saved Susan. Years later Susan complained of a pinching sensation in her chest. You used a local anesthetic and pulled out a broken wire that had been attached to her ribs. As we all looked with amazement, you said "I've never had this happen before but with you, Susan we never know what's next!" Later, a valve was put in.

At the beginning of this journey, we had been told that Susan would not live past the age of eight. She is now 54. She still has her problems and tends to them, keeps regular doctor visits and commits to necessary tests and procedures. But she is good as can be and happy, which is all any of us can ask for. Her adopted son, now 13, is her joy and peace and that child is a story unto himself.

Dr. DeSanctis, we will never forget you and the care you gave our daughter and us as well. We wish you an abundance of all the good things that God can shower on you in your retirement and we will, as we have done these many years, continue to pray for you and your family.

God bless!

*Henry and Geri Smolen*

Henry and Geri Smolen  
(Susan Whitlock's parents)