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By **Bob Shryock | For NJ.com**

Lauren Ward Larsen, who survived a near-death experience in 2000 when 250 complete strangers donated blood to help save her life, is returning to her Wenonah hometown on the Fourth of July to be honored as a "Hometown Legend." After the town's traditional Fourth of July morning parade, Larsen will be honored in the park and make her acceptance speech.

The 1980 Gateway graduate and current Colorado resident is president and ambassador of the Foundation for America's Blood Centers, based in Washington, D.C.

She went "code blue" in a San Francisco hospital after delivering her first child, Clare, by emergency C-section.

"Just hours after the C-section, my body failed miserably," Larsen says. "I went code blue four times during the night with my blood pressure dropping dangerously low. Each time, blood was pumped into my body as fast as my body could tolerate it. But my body refused to improve.

"My liver and kidneys failed. I had a grand mal seizure and slipped into a stage three coma — stage four would have required an immediate liver transplant. My body filled with toxins it couldn't eliminate. Doctors rated me a 9 1/2 on a 1 to 10 scale, 10 being the worst.

"It took five weeks in ICU, four weeks of kidney dialysis, numerous surgical procedures, a ton of prayers, medications and good energy from friends, family and people I didn't know before my body started to show signs of responding."

The outpouring would spark Larsen's book, "Zuzu's Petals." The title comes from "It's a Wonderful Life," the 1946 Christmas classic starring Jimmy Stewart, whose character, George Bailey, takes his daughter's rose petals from his pocket, proof his wish to live had been granted.

"I used to think I had a pretty wonderful life," Larsen writes in her book. "And then I got sick. And I saw no way home. And I wanted to die.

"Then a miracle happened. Something within me shifted. Surrounded by 'angels' who helped me — nurses, doctors, family, friends, my husband (Jeff) and later my daughter — I became the George Bailey of my own life."

Larsen says she was shocked to learn the extent of blood shortages in the United States, especially universal type O, noting "No amount of wealth or medical expertise can help when blood is needed."

She has become an accomplished international speaker and advocate for preeclampsia research and awareness, volunteer blood donations and even clean water initiatives in Sudan.

Larsen travels extensively and visits her foundation office in D.C. monthly.

And she's a certifiable legend in her old hometown.

There's a possibility the Phillies can lock up the NL East when they visit the Atlanta Braves in late September.

Those planning to travel with Jack Scott's South Jersey Baseball Oldtimers to Atlanta Sept. 25-28 could have seats for the clincher. And, good news, some tickets remain for the three-night excursion.

According to travel agent Carol Van Brill, the package cost is \$985 per person double, \$1,200 single and \$930 triple.

Cost includes two night games with the Braves, round-trip motor coach from Woodbury to Philadelphia International, round trip airfare from Philadelphia to Atlanta, three nights at Hampton Inn Downtown, tours of Centennial Olympic Park, the CNN Studio, and Stone Mountain Park, three breakfasts and two lunches.

A \$250 per person deposit is required with balance due by Aug. 10. Call Van Brill at **856-464-1046**.

Attorney Mark W. Ford will be guest speaker at the next Woodbury CBMC (Christian Businessmen's Connection) executive breakfast Friday, May 20, 7:30 p.m., at a new location, the Woodbury train station. Tickets are \$14. Call for reservations (**609-314-1096 or 609-980-7712**) by May 13.

An attorney since 1982, Ford has been president of Gloucester City Rotary, Gloucester City Lions, and Camden Habitat for Humanity. He serves as an elder pulpit assistant and teaches adult Sunday School at Bethany Presbyterian Church in Mendenhall, Pa.

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But once the babies were delivered, one thing was very clear to everyone in the room.

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