Kinney Noe is lucky to be alive.

For Kinney, what started out as a pleasant morning hunt in November 2011 quickly turned into a battle for his life.

Kinney, now 58, had just climbed into a deer stand on a farm in Lincoln County, Ky., when, without warning, the stand collapsed beneath him, sending him plummeting 23 feet.

When he landed, he was in a lot of pain, but conscious and able to reach into his shirt pocket for his cell phone. What he didn’t realize in that moment was that he’d been impaled by a tree about 3.5 inches in diameter – about the size of the large end of a baseball bat.

“I had two or three seconds after I stopped falling where I thought, ‘Am I OK?’ And then the pain started. I knew I wasn’t okay. I could tell something was majorly wrong.”

In the dark, all he could do was feel for the redial button on his phone. The last call he’d made had been to his 23-year-old daughter, Kandis, who was also hunting on the farm that morning.

“We had one bar (of reception on the phone),” he said. “Normally when we’re out there, we don’t have any.”

Kandis answered on the first ring. She called her mother, Kinney’s wife Rita, who called 911.

Rita also called friend Bill Johnson, who knew the location of the deer stand. She made arrangements for Johnson to meet the EMTs at a nearby market and lead them to Kinney.
“There was no way they’d have found me otherwise,” Kinney said.

The tree had entered his body on the right side, just below the belt line, passing first through Carhartt overalls, jacket and hunting gear. It went through his colon, the middle of his liver, through his diaphragm and into his right lung. Amazingly, it missed the major arteries that run through the abdomen.

By the time rescuers freed him, his blood pressure was dangerously low, but a helicopter had already landed to take him to UK. The tree, which had broken off when he fell on it, had to be transported with him.

Amazingly, Kinney remained conscious for much of his ordeal. Paramedic Aaron Stamper, a family friend, rode with Kinney in the helicopter.

“In the helicopter I said, ‘Aaron, do me one big favor, tell my wife and my daughters I love them if I don’t make it.’ And he told me he would.”

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–Kinney Noe

He was flown directly to the Level I Trauma Center at UK Albert B. Chandler in Lexington, where he was met by surgeon Bernard Boulanger, MD, and his team. He was evaluated in the Emergency Department and then, just an hour and 45 minutes after his fall, he was taken to surgery. There, Dr. Boulanger removed the tree and worked to save Kinney’s life.

“Our team of trauma professionals is prepared for these types of emergencies and it was a very smooth and rapid transition from ER to OR,” Dr. Boulanger said. “Everything worked like it was supposed to. Although Kinney’s injuries were severe, if an impaled patient makes it to a trauma center such as UK, we usually have a good chance of saving them.”

“The first hours after surgery were touch-and-go,” said Kinney’s wife, Rita. “I remember Dr. Boulanger coming to speak with us after surgery and he kept telling us ‘He’s alive,’ and I knew that if that was the most positive thing he could say, it wasn’t a good sign.”

Kinney spent the next 69 days in trauma ICU and was cared for by a dedicated team of nurses, therapists, pharmacists, and physicians from cardiothoracic, renal, pulmonary and gastroenterology, all of whom worked together to manage his complex injuries and complications.

He had seven surgeries between the day of the accident and March 22, 2012. He lost part of his right lung and spent three months on dialysis.

He credits Dr. Boulanger and other members of the UK HealthCare Blue Surgery Team with saving his life.

Kinney’s friends and family organized a blood drive in Stanford for the Kentucky Blood Center as a way to show their concern for him and their gratitude for the care that saved his life. Just under 200 people donated.

“They actually had to turn people away,” Kinney said proudly. Overall, the blood center received nearly 500 donations in Kinney’s name.

Although he’s still a frequent visitor to Chandler Hospital, these days Kinney is on the mend. And he can’t say enough about the care he has received at UK. “The doctors and nurses are fantastic. I have nothing but praises for them and the utmost respect for UK HealthCare.”

Dr. Boulanger gives equal credit to Kinney’s family (which also includes daughter Kindra, 28) and the early care he received. “There were so many people involved that deserve credit, including the pre-hospital care providers who got him here quickly, UK Hospital staff, and especially Kinney’s family. Whether they know it or not, they have been a key part of his recovery and it all combined for a positive outcome for Kinney.”

For information on the UK Gill Heart Institute, call 800-333-8874 or 859-257-1000.

You may also visit our website at ukhealthcare.uky.edu/gillheart.