The life of Joe Glavan, Ed.D., is a modern miracle. The journey of the vibrant, enthusiastic 92-year-old has reached high peaks and low valleys – many just in the past two years.

At age 91, Glavan was training to participate in his second Olympic-style Senior Games. The year before he had won a silver medal in the 50-meter freestyle swim and completed the mile walk. He enjoyed water aerobics and the exercise room at Independence Hill Retirement Community, where he has lived since 2012. But he began to notice his strength and coordination waning and soon became unable to walk or even feed himself. He had to leave his home and, as his condition deteriorated, move from assisted living, to skilled nursing, to hospice. He needed surgery but could not find a surgeon willing to operate on someone his age. Just steps from death’s door, he instructed his children to dispose of his possessions. His daughter, Katrina, clinging to hope, found one last physician willing to perform the needed surgery – spine surgeon Adewale Adeniran, M.D.

The last chance surgery on July 8, 2016, corrected the spinal myelopathy in Glavan’s neck and gave him a new lease on life.

“It is amazing what you take for granted,” Glavan said. “I lost the functionality of my hands. It was hard to find where my mouth was. I couldn’t even get out of bed.”

He set three motivating goals: to be able to feed himself, to walk, and lastly, to move back to his beloved home in Independence Hill.

The new physical therapy facilities at North Central Baptist Hospital were where he began his rehab after surgery. They still remember him, as he was one of their first patients and such a joyous man. It was there he focused the same determination he had devoted to his Olympic training into regaining command of his physical abilities. He started redeveloping his fine motor skills: squeezing small rubber balls in his hands, manipulating tiny beads imbedded in play dough and working on his core strength.

He incorporated 15 minutes of cardio exercise on the stationary bicycle or elliptical machine, a habit he continues daily. His balance was poor, he said, and it was necessary for the former athlete to relearn how to walk. Glavan described how the therapists would throw balls at him from different angles while he was standing to help him improve his balance.

“It is a slow process,” he said. “I didn’t realize how weak I was compared to how I used to be.”

By the end of September 2016, he was able to move back to Independence Hill Assisted Living, and in January 2017, he was strong enough to return to his independent apartment in Independence Hill Retirement Community. Now he can take care of his personal needs and is looking forward to getting in the pool for water aerobics again soon.

“When I get out of water aerobics I feel like a million bucks!” he said.

Until then, Glavan enjoys being back home. He loves the food, especially the delicious salmon. Katrina and her husband, Keith, join him for dinner every Sunday, and Wednesdays she takes him to the Parman library to check out the latest audio book releases. He listens to approximately 200 books a year, he said, with spy novels a favorite.

And most days Glavan joins a group of fellow sharks for a rousing game of cards. They have a regular schedule of poker, bridge, pinochle and Ma-Jong. He keeps his ill-gotten gains - a large tin of nickels - ready for the next game.

“The people I play with are really good,” he said, “and that makes it fun.” Glavan’s two other children, Joe and Denise, live in Colorado, where he retired from his position as Assistant Superintendent of Pueblo Colorado School District 60. His son traveled with him on the WWII Honor Flight to Washington D.C., a few years ago, where the U.S. Marine Corps veteran remembered his days serving in Okinawa, China and Guam when he was just 17. His latest goal: to be the oldest living WWII veteran.