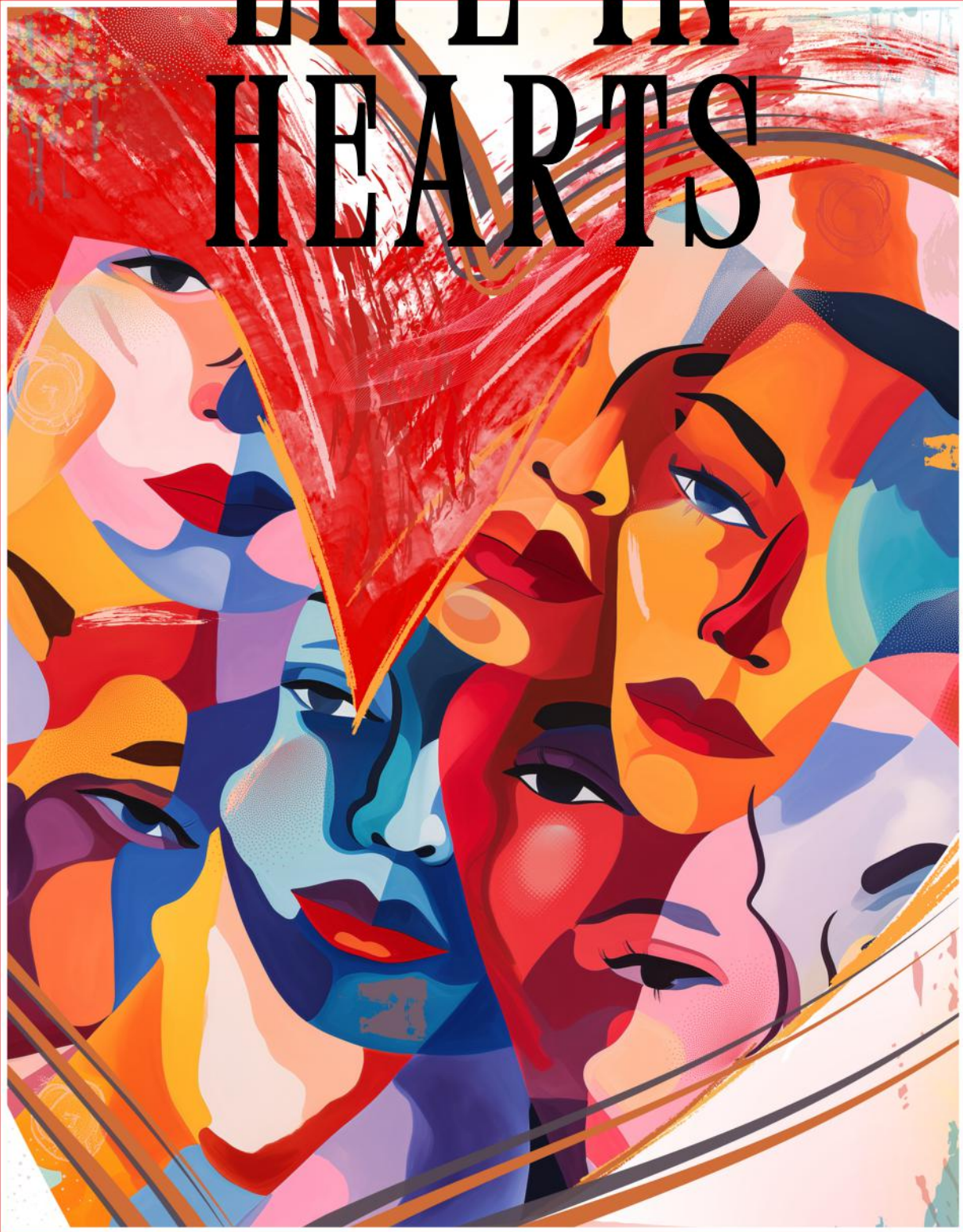


ISSUE 07
FEBRUARY
2025

LIFE IN HEART'S



CANADIAN WOMEN WITH MEDICAL HEART ISSUES
LIVING BRAVELY. LOVING BOLDLY.

LIFE IN HEARTS

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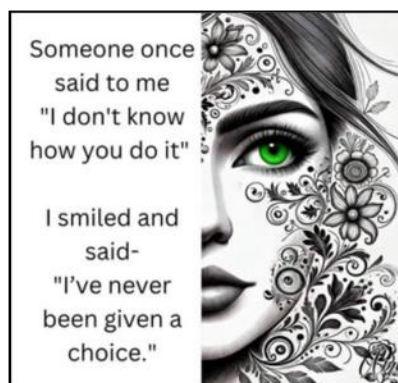
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EDITOR NOTES



EDITOR
Jackie Ratz, MB
Heart Failure, 2017

Here we are at issue number 07, and it's an extraordinary edition thanks to YOU!

This is a SPECIAL FEATURE issue for HEART MONTH, fully dedicated to sharing the heart journeys of women like you and me. We're highlighting the ways we navigate life while dealing with hearts, vascular issues, or brains that don't always make it easy for us.

The stories are truly inspiring; some contain challenging moments while others offer unexpected twists. However, they all share a common goal: to ensure that no one feels alone. We are Stronger Together!

A huge thank you to everyone for being on this journey with me...

COVER IMAGE



by Ruzica Subotic-Howell, Ontario
Mobitz 2 (periodic atrioventricular block with constant PR intervals in the conducted beats), 2024

I created this piece for this issue focusing on the theme of women supporting each other. This artwork is an interpretative representation of the boldness that resides within every woman. The abstract forms and overlapping elements symbolize the shared strength and experiences of women as they navigate life's challenges together. Embedded throughout the composition are circular motifs, representing the circle of life and the interconnectedness of strength of women within a supportive community.

The bold, abstract strokes outlining the heart serve as a poignant reminder of the harsh realities faced by women with heart disease. The rugged and imperfect edges of the heart reflect the weight of the struggle, emphasizing that this condition requires immense resilience and courage. Yet, the heart remains a central symbol of love.

This piece honours the bravery of women and celebrates the unity, support, and unwavering spirit they provide to one another.



Image created with AI Midjourney and digital design tool - 01.2025



REALLY?... TOO YOUNG?

by Lorie Plumpton-Stemberger, Northern Ontario
Heart Attack & Small Vessel Disease, 2019

A favourite quote of mine...

"If you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid."

Hello...this is my story...

It all began by going to a rock concert on a Sunday, where I was jumping up and down, sweating heavily. A friend noticed I didn't look well, but I brushed it off. It was a great concert!

Day 2 ...

On Monday I started feeling pain in my back, which got worse by Tuesday and had spread to my right arm (not my left).

Day 3...

By Wednesday, the pain was in the front of my chest and severe. I thought I'd pulled a muscle, so I booked a doctor's appointment for that Friday.

Day 4 ...

On Thursday, the pain continued, and I complained to my co-workers about my tight chest.

Day 5 ...

On Friday morning, I woke up drenched in sweat and went to the doctor, who sent me straight to the ER. That's when I learned I'd had a heart attack at age 45!



Doctors initially thought I was too young, but a blood test confirmed the diagnosis. I had two procedures while in hospital, receiving a total of seven stents and was diagnosed with small vessel disease.



I was in the hospital just over a week. Many people came to visit but my husband never left my side.

Genetics played a strong role, and I still struggle with daily angina despite many medications. Simple tasks are daunting challenges, making everyday life unpredictable and anxiety filled.

Despite the challenges, I'm determined to try to manage my condition and make the most of every single day.





WHY WONT ANYONE BELIEVE ME ?!?!?

by Charlotte Girard, Quebec

Microvascular Dysfunction and Vasospasms (INOCA) , 2017

Quote I live by: "Stronger Together!"



Ten years ago (2014), my life was busy with work, family, and regular physical activity. I had been fatigued for a long time, which I thought was normal, having just completed a university degree while working full time. I often found myself out of breath going up the stairs. I needed to sit halfway through my short walk from the train station to my workplace. One day at work, I lost sight in my left eye while experiencing an intense feeling of heat creeping up the base of my neck to the roots of my hair. My eyesight gradually returned over a few hours. I had an emergency consult in ophthalmology. Diagnostic: Event of Amaurosis fugax. Recommendation: You need to consult with Cardiology for vascular problems.

The following week, I couldn't even walk 100 meters. Making my bed was all I could accomplish in one day. The chest pain, shortness of breath from the slightest effort, the cardiac spasms, and the brain fog — accompanied by ever-present crushing fatigue — were my daily struggles for months on end.

As I reflect about this journey, I am tempted to tell my story from a new angle ...

Disbelief: "Inability or refusal to accept that something is real."

I knew something was terribly wrong with my body as I was unable to function. My biggest surprise was the refusal and dismissal of my condition by the medical community. With the help of my primary physician, I consulted 6 cardiologists over a span of 18 months.

Seeking/Searching/Finding: "are terms that describe the process of seeking information."

Throughout this journey of mine, I searched social media for information on my medical condition. In 2014, this condition was name "Syndrome X" by many cardiologists. I found a facebook group based in the USA for women who were also living with this condition. I was member number 150 back then. Although small, this group allowed me to exchange with women living with this condition for years. With their insight, I started to log my vitals (heart rate, blood pressure, oxygen level, sugar level) along with description of how I felt. I presented this log to my primary physician who helped make sense of it. It helped in identifying my triggers. With his support, I was referred to various cardiologists until we found one willing to listen.

.Being heard: *“someone acknowledges what we say, understand what that means and accept without judgement.”*

Cardiologist number 6 was the first one to really listen, took the time to review all the tests I already had, ordered some more and concluded with a diagnosis, Microvascular Angina.

This diagnosis came after 35 months seeking help. This milestone meant that I could now receive treatment, care and being believed by the medical professionals. I had hope!

Back to work: *“Before returning an employee to work, Human Resources needs to be certain that there is enough information about the capabilities and limitations related to the job duties.”*

I went back to work because the insurer denied long term disability and my condition did not have enough science history to justify it. I went on progressive return over a period of 6 months with medication adjustments every three weeks until the right combination was found.



Between adjusted medications and working from home 3 days a week. A sedentary position was what I settled for as my previous position, which I loved, I could no longer do. I finally retired from work 5 years later (2023).

Advocacy: *“Any action that speaks in favor of, recommends, argues for a cause, supports or defends, or pleads on behalf of others.”*

In 2018, I joined a new facebook group Canadian Women with medical heart condition where I discovered how prevalent women were underserved by the medical community. This awakened my desire to seek, take action and be part of changes which needed to take place.

That year I also joined the Canadian Women Heart Health Alliance with their mission to support clinicians, scientists, patients, and decision-makers to implement evidence, transform clinical practices, and impact public policy related to women's cardiovascular health.

Joining these groups was a godsend. My self-esteem was at its lowest point following all the dismissal I had experienced and the return to work to a sedentary position. Relating and telling my story as a Person With Lived and Living Experience allowed me to regain assurance and feeling heard, validated and valued member. I love having a place at the table and taking part of the conversation. Seeing changes happen is rewarding.

Over the years, I also joined HeartLife Foundation because heart conditions left untreated often lead to heart failure. This led the way to more opportunity and appreciation for this journey.

Journey is not a destination: *“The value and meaning of life are found in the experiences, lessons, and moments along the way, rather than solely in achieving specific goals or reaching a particular destination.”*

Ten years into this journey, I understand that my well being is associated to the things under my control:

- Lifestyle changes - diet had to be reviewed/improved
- Medications - I have to take them religiously
- Pro-active self-care is key
- Seek medical help when a new presentation of symptoms appear
- Exercise regularly to stay as fit as possible
- Adjust my sails as life unfolds

Resilience: *“Ability to withstand adversity & bounce back from difficult events”*

As my journey continues, I am well aware that I still need to advocate for myself on a regular basis to receive the best care. The struggle is real.

Last, but not least, I'm thankful for all that was learned and shared, and for the people who are giving me reason to smile every day.





70th

BREATHLESSNESS TO DIAGNOSIS

by Judy Christensen, Ontario

HCM - Hypertrophic Cardiomyopathy, 2019

A quote I love is:

"Nature, Time & Patience are the three great physicians."

My heart story began about 15 years ago when I would go for walks on our hilly rural road with my neighbour who was a couple of years older than me. She could walk and talk no problem but I felt breathless. Sometimes I felt like I had trouble keeping up with her. I thought, "Boy am I out of shape!"

In 2012 when I mentioned my shortness of breath to my doctor he did a blood test and checked my thyroid. His diagnosis was, "You're just out of shape" I accepted that because most of my life I had worked in jobs where I mostly sat all day. I had never been athletic or participated in any sports.

But when I got a job that involved walking several times a day I thought, "Okay, now I'm going to get into shape." I also got a new doctor when my old one retired but he never picked up on anything when I had my annual physical with him. In spite of all the walking, the shortness of breath persisted.

Finally late in 2017 I saw a Physicians Assistant for my PAP test. She asked me lots of questions and listened to my concern about the shortness of breath. She ordered further testing - blood work, a stress test, electrocardiogram, and echo. It was discovered that I had extremely low hemoglobin requiring a blood transfusion. The stress test and echo were delayed until the hemoglobin problem was addressed. I was given a colonoscopy and endoscopy to determine if a bleeding issue had caused the low hemoglobin. Nothing was found.

Early in 2019 I finally saw the Internist at our local small town hospital to have the Echo and Stress Test. The Stress test results concerned her, and the Echo showed her that I had a thickening in the wall of my left ventricle. Also my blood pressure readings had been high enough to warrant starting me on medication to treat it. I had no idea what it all that might mean and left feeling I should have asked more questions. It wasn't until a follow-up appointment with her that she mentioned the name of my condition.

Hypertrophic Cardiomyopathy (HCM). I was not clear on what that might mean for me or what the treatment might be. She suggested that I will need to see a cardiologist ... the nearest one to me was an hour and a half away.

In June of 2019 I retired from my full time job 3 weeks before my 65th birthday. I called it my Freedom 64.9.

Shortly after that I had my cardiologist appointment in Barrie. He added a new medication called Rhythmodan to the blood pressure meds I was already taking.

I had several more visits to Barrie over the next 2 years for Echocardiograms, a Stress Echo and a cardiac MRI. My Barrie cardiologist then suggested he would be sending me to a cardiologist at Toronto General who specialized in my condition.

But now we were well into COVID and I really didn't relish the thought of a trip to Toronto and visiting a hospital. He said I could wait. Finally after another few months went by and the COVID threat seemed to be lessening he mentioned Toronto again and I agreed.

In the meantime, my shortness of breath was increasing and climbing small hills or stairs caused a tightness in my chest.

In May of 2022 I saw another cardiologist in Toronto. She told me

about two possible treatments for Hypertrophic Cardiomyopathy. Non invasive procedure that accessed my heart by way of an artery and injected alcohol to shrink the thickened area of heart muscle. The other possibility was open heart surgery.

June was a trip to Toronto for an angiogram. A follow up phone call with the cardiologist told me I was not a candidate for the non invasive procedure and she would refer me to the surgeon to talk about surgery. The good news was my arteries were clear. In September I saw Dr Ralph Edwards at Toronto General. He said I was a good candidate for this surgery and explained to me what it involved. However, I was kind of surprised that he left me with the choice of whether to proceed with booking surgery. My immediate feeling was No! Too scary, too dangerous, still COVID danger in hospitals. I went home and procrastinated.

I forget when exactly, but somewhere in there I discovered the FB group and got in touch with Paula Henderson who told me about her journey with HCM. It was a relief to talk to someone who had been through it, but still I procrastinated.

Then in January 2023 my original Barrie cardiologist called to follow up with me and he was giving me all the reasons why I should go ahead. Around the same time my family doctor pointed out those same reasons, then to top it off a phone

call from the Toronto cardiologist. They were all saying this condition is getting worse and you're not getting any younger. I realized I had 3 experts pointing me in the same direction.

At the end of January 2023 I made the dreaded call to Dr Edwards Office. To my surprise his assistant's response was "when would you like to have it done?" I quickly blurted out... "Ummm, March?" Not too soon, but not so far off that I'd have time to work myself into such extreme anxiety I would back out. A few days later she called back with a date - March 8th.



I could say the rest is history because here I am almost two years later feeling pretty good and telling my story. I feel like the surgery, hospital stay and recovery could be a separate story, or suffice it to say, all went well, I have nothing but praise for Dr. Edwards and all the Doctors, nurses and staff at Toronto General. My story is a positive one and I am so grateful.





NINE DAY WONDER

by Katherine Waters, New Foundland and Labrador
Spontaneous Coronary Artery Dissection (SCAD),
Leaky Mitral Valve, Coronary Artery Bypass Graft
(CABG) & Heart Failure, 2018

Something you may not know about me ...

Creative pursuits have made all the difference for me during my rehab and on an ongoing basis. Like the saying goes "a maker has gotta make!"

When bad stuff happened, my former mother-in-law, Doris, would say, "Perhaps it will be a nine day wonder - nine days from now we'll wonder why we got so worked up over it." If she heard me fussing over something that hadn't yet occurred, she would tell me, "Don't borrow trouble." I was not quite out of my teens when I first heard these and, honestly, couldn't possibly appreciate the wisdom contained in them.

In late August 2018, I suffered two Spontaneous Coronary Artery Dissection (SCADs) that resulted in multiple heart attacks, a leaky mitral valve, Coronary Artery Bypass Graft (CABG) and congestive heart failure. My road to recovery was long and full of complications. I had pulmonary emboli, twice. I struggled with fluid management and within three months post SCAD was

undergoing testing in preparation for referral for heart transplant.

I was weak as a mouse when I first got home. I needed help with every aspect of daily living and struggled to even keep food down. I couldn't sleep, I had terrible anxiety and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) flashbacks. Slowly I stabilized, and the focus shifted away from transplant referral to seeing what might be possible with the heart I still had.

The first few years I struggled with dizziness and low blood pressure that caused me to fall a lot. I used a rollator as I had no stamina for walking. Sitting at a table chopping vegetables constituted a cardio workout for me. Taking a shower meant I did little else afterwards.

Thanks to wonderful support at home, I was encouraged to stay engaged and hopeful! I gently pushed myself and, eventually, could shower on my own, do light chores and could manage a walk around my block. I've had two major improvements in my ejection fraction and am almost up to 33%. Today, if you didn't know my history, you'd think I was a pretty healthy 60+ year old. I can climb a flight of stairs, I can garden and even drive short distances again.

The secret to my success is I live in a very well-constructed "bubble." I've adjusted my diet and daily living habits to make the very best of what I have to work with. I severely limit my sources of stress and have given my creative habits full reign.

Part of that bubble also relates to the pearls of wisdom shared by Doris so long ago. At first, I viewed my SCADs as the worst things that had ever happened to me. I blamed my body for betraying me and fell into a victimhood that got a lot of validation.



Slowly, I realized I was living differently, very much in the moment, and finding joy in things I might not have even noticed before. I reached a level of peace and contentment I had previously never known in my life.

I also realized that instead of betraying me, my body had protected me through some life-threatening events and was the reason I was even experiencing this new way of living.

Once I made peace with myself, I also stopped acting like a perpetual patient. I stopped weighing myself daily, wearing a Fitbit, and taking my blood pressure, etc. I listen to my body very carefully now so she never has to yell at me to get whatever we need. It is no coincidence that 2024 was my very best year since the SCADs.

A big piece of my rehabilitation was to let go of

"Don't Borrow Trouble"
wise words from my mother in law about life's worries.

what I can't control. I've made not borrowing trouble a way of life. And if something does arise, I treat it as a nine-day wonder. Experience has taught me that it is truly an ill-wind that blows no one some good, and such ill-winds are very rare.

Another big part of my recovery is also thanks to Doris as she taught me how to knit back in the early 1980s. When I was very sick, knitting was the most physically accessible and familiar, creative outlet for me. It took my mind off things and made me realize that even if I never fully regain what was lost through the SCADs, I am still capable of bringing beauty and color into the world.

Yes the SCADs were traumatic, but the aftermath has had its gifts. I understand I have intrinsic value, not based on what I can do for others. Yes, I had to close my business and yes, my life has contracted in many ways. But all of that has heightened my senses so that what once would have been a very small world to me, now seems utterly expansive.

It may have taken longer than nine days to understand, but life does sometimes work in truly wonderful ways!





THE APPLE DOES NOT FALL FAR FROM THE TREE

by Christie Chlopan, Alberta

Long QT Syndrome & Heart Failure, 2024

Quote I live by:

"Life is too short. If you have to be anyone, be yourself."

My name is Christie Chlopan, I am 44 years old from southern Alberta and was recently diagnosed with "Long-QT Syndrome". In 2024, I learned the hard way "if you don't schedule a break your body will take one for you and it probably won't be at a convenient time."

I was 23 when my Mom had a heart attack, and due to errors during Angioplasty and Double Bypass, died. She only just turned 50. I have spent the last 21 years doing everything I could to NOT end up the same as her. Sometimes, fate has other plans.

In August 2024, I fell ill – terrible virus. Days of stomach issues, finally presenting to the ER with high heart rate and shortness of breath. Ultimately, I was sent home to heal. For the next

2 months, these 2 symptoms continued, and I ignored them as I assumed I was still getting over it. My smart watch would tell me I was "in the Active Zone" while I was seated, I laughed it off, time and time again.

Thanksgiving weekend, I was struggling to breathe while sleeping and it was getting worse daily. Monday, October 14 I tried sleeping sitting up on the couch, still having issues I checked my watch app – and it showed multiple notifications of "signs of A-Fib". It was time to move. My partner took me to the hospital immediately.

Upon arrival at the ER, they quickly hooked me up to monitors which confirmed I was in A-Fib and was moved to a room. 31 hours in the ER before being admitted to a ward, still in A-Fib as

the meds weren't helping. Looking through my watch app, we could see I had been "showing signs of A-Fib" for over 2 months. Stress tests planned, and cancelled; Cardioversion planned, and cancelled. It was a trying few days.

On day 4, I was moved to the ICU where they could perform a Transesophageal- Echocardiogram (TEE) and Cardioversion. The TEE showed no clots, the Cardioversion was performed. No longer in A-Fib, I was given IV meds to ensure I stayed out of it. I was moved back to ward to await other tests.

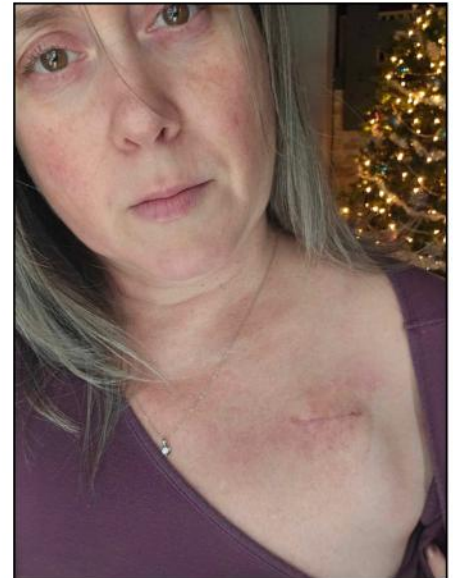
On day 5 while my friends and eldest daughter were visiting, I had a strange heart rhythm that lasted a few seconds, setting off the alarm before settling. The nurses peeked in to see me. A minute later it happened again, I felt the race in the centre of my chest, but this time it didn't stop – I put my head back saying something was wrong, and I was unconscious. I was in V-Fib. My friends rushed my daughter out, as the team came rushing in. 4 minutes of chest compressions and 3 shocks got me back into rhythm. I woke up, feeling like I was being smothered and I was fighting whoever it was. I opened my eyes to see her doing chest compressions, and I stopped fighting. They had saved my life. First thing I

said, before even understanding the severity of the situation, was "My kid just witnessed that". ICU is my new home.

Over the course of the next 2 weeks, I was transported to Calgary twice for tests. When I was told my first test would be an Angiogram to see if Angioplasty was necessary I could not bear the thought – full panic set in. Thankfully, the Angiogram showed no blockages, "textbook heart". The Cardiac MRI showed no heart attack and no damage. I was perfect, but I wasn't.

The echocardiogram showed my left ventricle functioning at 25%, Congestive Heart Failure. The Cardiac MRI showed improvement to 47%. "Long-QT Syndrome" is a heart rhythm disorder that causes fast, chaotic heartbeats – clean and healthy heart (plumbing), it was the electrical signals that got me.

After 3 weeks in the hospital, I had a Dual Pacemaker / Implantable cardioverter-defibrillator (ICD) implanted. The Pacemaker will keep my heart at 70 BPM minimum, and the defibrillator will shock me into rhythm if my heart gets out of control again. My first day home, I had a "life-threatening event", the Pacemaker did its magic to stabilize me. It worked, and I was not shocked.



"Trust the device", know I have a "guardian angel" to save me, is difficult. Every weird beat, every pain, head rush, or headache is terrifying. As a mother, relying on my partner and kids for everything for the first time – driving, no lifting my arm to do my own hair, cooking and cleaning – was a challenge. Andy Grammer's song "Not The End", the words really stuck with me as I came home feeling like a burden to them: "It's just a chapter in your story, turn that page and grab that pen; Cause, darling, everything will be alright - If it's not alright, then it's not the end".

The idea of this being the rest of my life is terrifying – but I got this, with the support of my family and team. It's just a chapter, not the end.





MY LIFE IS A MOVIE SCRIPT

by Erin Thomas, Manitoba

STEMI Heart Attack & Heart Failure, 2017

Something many do not know about me:

From a young age, I thought of myself as a writer. I write poetry and fiction and still hope to be published one day.

If I saw the story I'm about to tell you – my story – in a movie, or read it in a book, I wouldn't believe it was true.

My name is Erin Thomas. I am a Teacher Librarian in Winnipeg and I try every day to make each child really want to be in my library classroom. I give my students experiences they can learn from. We experiment, we get our hands dirty, we talk, and we have fun. It is exciting to share things with them and hear what they think.

One day in 2017 however, my life changed. In fact, it almost came to a sudden end.

It was halfway through February, and for days I had found myself short of breath when walking short distances and climbing stairs. By evening, I was exhausted. I just felt 'off' ... I knew I should see my doctor, of course. But I was so busy...I am sure you can relate...

Still, my symptoms persisted. My husband, Wilf, insisted that I needed to see the doctor and I finally agreed to go.

That day, February 16, is one I will never forget. During my morning cup of tea, I felt a stabbing pain in my back.

My doctor at the time was in a clinic across the street from St. Boniface Hospital. He told me he was concerned about my symptoms and sent us to the St. Boniface Hospital Emergency Department for an electrocardiogram (EKG) test.

Little did I know, I could have been living the last moments of my life.

By the time we reached the Hospital, I could not walk any further. My husband knew something serious was going on. He had to wheel me into the Emergency Department.



The EKG technologist, Denise, asked me to raise my arms for the test. When I could not raise them high enough, she said, “I am worried you are having a heart attack, Erin.”

“It really hurts” I gasped. And that’s when I collapsed.

I had suffered what has been called a “widow-maker” heart attack (called a STEMI). My LAD (left anterior descending artery) was 100% blocked; my heart was fluttering rapidly; and my kidneys shut down.

I was dying.

Denise called a hospital Code Blue: cardio-pulmonary arrest. Staff rushed in to save me, and used an automatic CPR device, called a Lucas Machine, to do chest compressions on me for almost an hour and a half. My life hung in the balance.

My husband remembers looking down at my cold, lifeless form; glassy eyes staring at the ceiling. “I thought that was it,” he said later. It was hard on him – harder than I think he is willing to admit to me.

I was hooked up to a complex life support system called an ECMO. I later learned at the time, St. Boniface Hospital was the only health care facility in Manitoba that has an ECMO, and it was relatively new. Had this happened to me somewhere else or just a few years earlier, I would not have lived.

That night, no one knew whether I would survive, or ever wake up.

The doctors told Wilf and my three adult sons that brain damage due to the lack of oxygen was likely. My family texted my step-daughter, who lives in England with the news.

After five days in the Cardiac Intensive Care Unit, I was taken off life support. If I was going to have a good chance of survival, I had to hold my own, and thankfully – I did.

My heart kept beating without help, and my breathing came back. Weakly, I squeezed a doctor’s hand and responded when they touched my feet.

February 23rd is the first day I remember. As my voice returned it became clear that, although I had lost a week, my mind seemed intact. One night, Wilf made an inside joke about a TV show we liked and I responded, which the doctor saw as a good sign.

Because my kidneys had shut down, I had to undergo dialysis and we thought I would be dealing with having treatments several times a week for the rest of my life. However, after two sessions of dialysis, my kidneys began working on their own!

Fears of brain damage were allayed by a visit from a neurologist and an MRI which revealed that, although I’d undergone 80 minutes of compressions to keep my heart going, I had suffered no brain damage.

There was a health care aide on the Cardiology ward, named Ricardo, who spent time teaching me how to build my strength. He showed me how to use my arms to pull myself up to a sitting position. His work meant so much to me, because he helped me regain my independence.

On March 15th, almost one month after I had been wheeled into the St. Boniface Hospital Emergency Department, I was discharged.

One of the hardest things I have had to come to terms with since, is how devastated my family would have been had they lost me that day. Wilf still says to me, “I watched you die once, and I don’t ever want to do that again.”





And as a teacher, I still can't imagine how awful it would have been for my elementary students to be told that Mrs. Thomas had died. For a lot of them, death still hasn't touched their lives. Teaching is my calling. The terrible thought of not being able to do it was why it was such a focus for me to return full time in the fall of 2017.

September 6th, some seven months after my heart stopped in the EKG room at St. Boniface Hospital, I stood and welcomed a new group of students to school.



Heart attacks and heart failure have touched so many families. I learned the hard way this could happen to anyone, at any time.

After my experience I spend time helping people to learn about heart health and take steps to improve their heart health.

Quote as a life lesson from my experience ...

"I think this life is amazing and so finite, and you can't have it again, so all you can do every day is ask yourself: am I making the most of today?"

- Ricky Gervais




 **Wear Red to raise awareness about women's heart health**

February 13



#HERHEARTMATTERS
For more information and resources, visit: WEARREDCANADA.CA

Events planned from coast to coast with many offering on-line access too!



The Canadian Women's Heart Health Alliance (CWHHA) is a volunteer network of experts and advocates aiming to improve women's cardiovascular health across the lifespan.

Our Vision:
To improve women's cardiovascular health across the lifespan.

Our Mission:
To support clinicians, scientists, patients, and decision-makers to implement evidence, transform clinical practices and impact public policy related to women's cardiovascular health.

[CLICK HERE](#)



YES IT'S MY HEART... IS IT YOURS TOO?

by Christina Stuwe, Alberta
Triple Bypass, 2017

One of my favorite quotes is by The Dali Lama:

"Just as the ripples spread out when a single pebble is dropped into water, the actions of individuals can have far reaching effects."

I had triple bypass open heart surgery at the age of 47 due to coronary heart disease. I am a business woman working in finance, a published poet in several publications, a strong advocate for the Heart & Stroke Foundation, as well as an author of my first book- Yes It's My Heart...Is it Yours Too? (available on Amazon). I love to ride my E-bike all over our city and in the mountains.

My story is one I repeatedly tell because I want to have far reaching effects to help women know they are not alone. My long story has been captured in my book that I mentioned above.

My short story is this: my heart decided to nudge me one Saturday morning as I was relaxing and enjoying cartoons with my son. It went from a relaxed heart rate to pounding like a freight train in my chest. Okay, maybe it didn't just nudge me, it kicked me into high alert. It took over seven months of follow up, pushing doctors, multiple tests, and waiting in order to be given a proper diagnosis as to why my heart reacted the way it did.

I was stunned to learn that I had three arteries that were blocked, one of which was at 100%, which meant I would need a triple bypass. But, it also meant that I had suffered a heart attack at age 44, but never realized it until three years later.

During those seven months of discovery, I had so much support from friends, family and clients to help me through. My one constant on all my appointments was my husband. He stepped up and was my voice when I had none, reason when I had lost mine, and a shoulder to cry on as I absorbed the much needed but dreaded diagnosis.

There were a number of lessons learned on this journey of my heart. I learned to breathe and take a moment to absorb what's happening, to stand my ground no matter how uncomfortable it was and demand answers to my many questions. In particular, I realized the importance of having someone by my side to help me interpret test results and doctor's diagnoses. Lastly, I learned, and continue to learn, to take each day as it comes. My hope is that my journey can give guidance and hope to you, on your own heart or health journey.





IT CAN HAPPEN ANYWHERE...

by Lisa Marshall, British Columbia
Sudden Cardiac Arrest, Mitral Valve Prolapse,
Bradycardia, Atrial Fibrillation, 2000 & 2024

Something many do not know about me...

In my role with the Ministry of Education, I was fortunate to be part of the creation of the new curriculum in BC. This curriculum has been internationally groundbreaking, and we have had many groups from interested countries/jurisdictions visit us to learn more about our process and experience.

I glanced around the room, making sure I had everything that I had brought with me. My trip to Montreal, although brief, had been well worth it. I was able to see my son and his apartment, visit with my sister who had made a 5-hour drive from Ontario to meet me, and explored a few of the many sights of this beautiful city.

“Hurry up”, my sister called to me, as she wheeled more than her fair share of coolers, boxes and assorted paraphernalia towards her car. I trundled down the stairs and out onto the street, dragging our suitcases behind me.

Just a short minute down the block we came to a four-way intersection, and seeing the way clear, we both began to cross the road. My heart rate was beating faster than was warranted by my

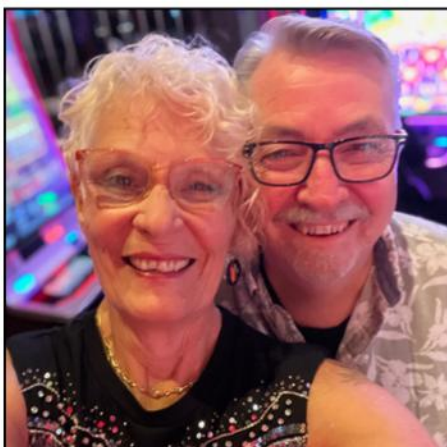
exertion, but nothing out of the ordinary. As I stepped out onto the street, I started to get dizzy but told myself to hurry up as I needed to clear the intersection. But as I reached the middle of the road, the world started going dark around me, and I knew then I wasn’t going to make the curb. Fade to black.

Unbeknownst to me, my sister looked back to see me slowly collapse onto the street, amongst our suitcases. I started agonal breathing, and as an ex-firefighter she knew something was seriously wrong. Just then a car with three doctors on their way to brunch pulled up. One of them jumped out, leaped over my body, and began CPR. Soon the paramedics arrived, and after 28 minutes of CPR, five shocks and three further cardiac arrests, my heart finally decided to keep beating.

The emergency doctors notified my sister and son that I would be placed into a coma to allow my body to heal, but that wasn't for me. I was out of the coma within 12 hours, and on my recovery journey. Over the next two and a half weeks I slowly recovered enough to fly home to BC. With six broken ribs and a pneumothorax, flying was off the table until I had stabilized more.

The specialists informed me that my sudden cardiac arrest was idiopathic, and because it had no known cause, there was little that could be done to ensure that it would never happen again. I was fitted with an ICD, which replaced my pacemaker I had received for bradycardia a year earlier, and sent on my way.

What surprised us the most was that this was unrelated to my other heart conditions. Twenty-four years ago, I had undergone open heart surgery to repair my mitral valve, which had prolapsed and was regurgitating blood. I had almost died leading up to this, as the prolapse was severe and I had extreme difficulty breathing/getting enough oxygen.



Following the surgery was years of atrial fibrillation and flutter, elimination of all alcohol and caffeine from my diet, and a long road to recovery. However, I was very fortunate – the repair of my mitral valve meant that I could finally exercise, something I had been unable to do for most of my life, and the atrial fibrillation was treatable with cardioversion whenever it happened. I became very used to being 'rebooted' and took it in stride whenever it was needed.

Still, we all age, and I'm not any different. In 2022 the bouts of atrial fibrillation became evermore frequent, and my electrophysiologist recommended an ablation. This was fortunately successful, and the atrial fibrillation eased up to almost nothing. However, what it did do is cause me to develop bradycardia.

Unbeknownst to me my heart rate was quickly dropping, culminating in a very exciting lunch with family when I asked to be taken to the hospital immediately as I was dizzy and passing out.

My heart rate was dropping to the 20s when I slept, and high 30s/low 40s during the day. The pacemaker fixed all that, and in a few weeks, I was back to my usual self.

This most recent event has certainly been the most impactful. While the open-heart surgery 24 years ago caused the most PTSD and the longest recovery, having a sudden cardiac arrest and seeing on the hospital documents that I died and was revived has been unsettling.

Despite all this, I consider myself unbelievably fortunate on many levels. Not only did I receive CPR soon enough that my neurological deficits are relatively minor, I also have a wonderfully supportive family.

I have been able to take these past few months off work, and by and large I feel almost back to my old self. I now also have a new and improved passenger with me at all times – a defibrillator which will hopefully mitigate any nasty arrhythmias that decide to come my way. And I have the good fortune to really know that our time here is not guaranteed and can change at the drop of a hat.

Mine did, and I lived to tell the tale. Not many are that lucky – cardiac arrests have about a 7-8% rate of survival, and of that number only a fraction of those get away virtually unscathed. I won the lottery that day in September 2024, and I hold that close to me. I am determined to not take for granted this extra life that I have been given.





FOREVER 25...

by Nicole Nickerson, Nova Scotia
Coronary Arterial Disease plus
two NSTEMIS, 2014 & 2018

Favourite quote:

*"Life is tough, my darling,
but so are you"*
-Stephanie Bennett-Henry

I am 41 years old and live in beautiful Nova Scotia with my husband, 2 awesome children plus fur babies. I have Coronary Arterial Disease and have had two NSTEMIS.

I have become an advocate for women's heart disease because of my sister and my heart experiences. Despite being known as a vocal advocate for change, people are always surprised to find out I am actually very shy!

In 2014, significant changes occurred in my life. On January 9 I would receive news that my younger sister Ashley at age 25, had died from a massive heart attack. There were no warning signs, no complaints. It was a complete shock.

After the shock of my sister's passing, I decided to have myself checked for heart disease. Everything came back good. A few months later, after eating an egg sandwich, I had a strange unknown feeling

in my chest. It felt like bad indigestion. Blaming my lunch I started to eat Tums, but the feeling did not want to go away. After a few hours I went to the hospital.

I was checked over and before my bloodwork had even come back they told me I was suffering from GERD (Gastroesophageal reflux disease) - essentially heartburn. They also mentioned to me that it was impossible for me to be having a heart attack as I just had a stress test a month earlier.

They handed me a prescription and I was on my way home. The pain (bad indigestion feeling) never went away and so I ended up going to another hospital that had all female staff working. Immediately I felt the care and concern was different. Before long I was being sent to the larger city hospital for the Catherization Lab. There it was determined I had a heart event and I received a stent.

Life moved on. I got married and became pregnant. I was closely monitored, and everything went so well that I was told I could have a second child. Imagine our surprise when we discovered we were expecting again on my daughter Renee's first birthday. Such a marvellous surprise.

This pregnancy however felt different to me. I had gestational diabetes, my baby wasn't growing like he should, and over all I just didn't feel great.

On the anniversary of my sister's death, I was home with Renee when I started to have chills. I honestly thought I was coming down with a cold. I called my Husband at work and asked him if he could come home early if he had the chance. I made supper and fed Renee but was aware that I was starting to feel off. I couldn't quite place it, but it certainly wasn't what my last heart attack felt like.



I started to pace the floors, drinking bottle after bottle of water. Finally, I told Victor it was time to go to the hospital.

Still thinking it was anxiety because of the date, I got Renee ready for bed then off we went. It had started to snow heavily outside so we went to the local hospital.

When we arrived, they took us in right away. My BP was very high and with my cardiac history they decided to take bloodwork.

Once my second troponin level test came back it was confirmed that I was having a heart event and around the same time they also thought I may be going into labour. Such a scary time.

I would need to get to the larger city hospital immediately and that was to be via helicopter. We were taken to the regional site where we were picked up by LifeFlight. Once

I arrived at the city hospital, I became a patient on the Coronary Care Unit (CCU) for 6 days.

When the care team felt I was stable enough to deliver my son breached so I ended up with a c-section. I got to spend 2 hours with my new bundle of joy until I was returned to the CCU.

The next day I was taken to the Catherization lab where I received another stent. After that I was transferred to the children's hospital where my son was. I was released the following day and William got to come home a week later!

Despite all of this both William, (now 7) and I are healthy. I have taken our family's tragedy to educate others. In the beginning sharing was healing for me, I didn't want to think my sister's death was in vain.

After observing numerous disparities in rural and gender-specific health care I decided to become a women's heart health advocate mostly so nobody else would have to go through what my family has and so many others have. Awareness and proactive care is critical and I am passionate to improve both.

Today I understand that so many women have gone through similar situations and we have a bond... the heart warrior bond. I may have lost my sister but I have gained so many more.





SUPRISE! YOU HAVE VALVE DISEASE...

by Cheryl Burford, Ontario
Valve Disease, 2022

Something many people do not know about me:

"I love to photograph sunsets! To watch the sky turn from bright sun, to hues of purple to orange or fire red is just so amazing to me. It is a chance to take focus off of what might have been a tough day to feel a sense of gratefulness. Definitely a mood changer for me."

To say I was shocked to hear that I had a damaged valve is an understatement. How can an active, healthy 48 year old have life turned upside down so quickly? It all began in April of 2022, I began to have heart palpitations and shortness of breath every day after my usual running of errands and regular walks. Those walks turned into needing breaks every few minutes.

My family doctor sent me for an ultrasound and blood work. He noticed something unusual and referred me to a cardiologist. I ended up being admitted in June to the Ottawa Heart Institute with shortness of breath. Scary words such as cardioversion and ablation were mentioned as a group of cardiologists and specialists reviewed my chart.

Thankfully, neither procedure was done at the time but I was prescribed several medications and

was going to be followed closely. Once my official diagnosis came, everything surrounding my heart became very real and several procedures quickly followed.

I had a TEE (Transesophageal Echocardiogram) in December 2022 and an angiogram in January of 2023. My open heart surgery (OHS) date was confirmed as February 15, 2023. It was all so fast and I was feeling quite nervous and the thoughts of "what happens if I don't make it" and "what if there are complications" entered into my brain.

Those thoughts disappeared quickly after meeting my surgeon, Dr. Chan and team. I remembered to focus on prayer and found ways to be at peace. Some of that peace was made possible because of the wonderful and caring staff. I will be forever grateful and will shout them out every chance I get.



Since my diagnosis, I am inspired by the women I have met that have battled heart issues. My heart and mindset have turned to listening and sharing experiences that have brought me many “heart sisters”.

The first nurse I met was Emily in the CICU. She was so very gracious to my parents, always willing to answer any questions and encourage me. After my surgery, I was so nervous to move but the staff got me up walking around.

When the doctor came in to take me off the external pacemaker my heart rate dropped. It was quickly determined that I would need a pacemaker. Exactly one week after my open heart surgery (OHS), I had a pacemaker implanted.

I had said to the doctors, “Whatever you need to do to make me better... do it!” I was discharged two days later.

I recovered at home with my parents helping me out. I really was not recovering though. I ended up back at the hospital one week later with fluid build up around my heart. I had the fluid removed. This is a common complication from surgery.

Two days later, I had a cardioversion. I was in the hospital for 17 days for the second stay. This was way more


challenging of a time ... more so than going through the valve replacement

My recovery plan included taking part in Cardiac Rehab. It was just what I needed to feel like myself again - to regain not only my physical strength, but my inner strength.

I had been put through so much it was so encouraging to have my Physiotherapist Bridgette and Nurse Irene cheering me on! I will be celebrating my 2 year heart-versary in 2025 and I am so thankful for the team at The Ottawa Heart Institute for giving me my active life back.

I refer to my heart journey as an emotional roller coaster ride. Some constants during my hospitalization and recovery were my parents, brother, family and friends, journaling and new found friendships through Women@Heart and Canadian Women FB group. I am forever grateful to the many doctors, nurses and staff at The Ottawa Heart Institute and my current cardiologist Dr. O'Brien.





**Heart Valve Voice
Canada**

[CLICK HERE](#)

What we do...

Heart Valve Voice Canada connects you to the information and resources you need on your journey with heart valve disease, from pre-diagnosis through treatment and recovery. As Canada's only not-for-profit heart valve organization led by patients, we raise awareness of heart valve disease, advocate for people with these conditions.

What is heart valve disease?

The heart has four valves that open and close to control blood flow to your body. If one or more of those valves don't open or close properly, that means you have heart valve disease. It may be something you were born with, or that develops during your life.

Heart valve disease is common and serious, but treatable. Knowing the symptoms to look out for and when you should see a healthcare provider are the best ways to detect and treat possible heart valve disease.



FOR THE LOVE OF HORSES...

by Christine Fraser-McDonald, Ontario
Congenital Aortic Stenosis

My favorite quote is:

"Don't let yesterday take up too much of today."

My name is Christine Fraser-McDonald, and I am 60 years old. I was born in Chatworth, Ontario (population 400!!) and now live in Owen Sound, Ontario with my husband Murray (for 22 years), who puts up with the dogs, cats and horses (and saddles and bridles in the basement!!). He has been a great support throughout my health journey.

I was diagnosed with Congenital Aortic Stenosis when I was four years old for my kindergarten checkup.

Do they even do that anymore?



I survived public school and started riding horses in grade 8. It is interesting to note that I didn't have to take phys ed (thank goodness) because of my heart condition, but I could gallop a 1200 pound horse around a cross country course?

I graduated from the University of Guelph in 1987 with a degree in Geography. I started at the County of Grey as a land use planner and 28 years later I am the Clerk for the Municipality of Arran-Elderslie and sometimes Acting

Chief Administrative Officer. I am looking forward to retiring in 2026.

I had my heart checkups at Sick Kids in Toronto until I aged out and have been going to University Hospital in London ever since.



One thing that a lot of people don't know about me:

I am an astronomy nerd as well as a geomorphology nerd. If I am not looking at the night sky, then I am looking at landforms and figuring out how the glacier made them!!

In 1992 I had my first open heart surgery. I had a donor aortic valve. I went back for my six- week checkup and it was discovered that part of the valve had come unstitched. So back I went to UH to have another open heart surgery. I had to tell my docs that I had to wait to have it so that I could go to my Auntie Barb's wedding! She was a nurse at UH at that time and is also a Heart Warrior.

I was given 8 to 10 years for my donor valve. At my 2019 checkup (27 years later), my doctor told me that it was time and that I needed another surgery. I was not allowed to ride as my aorta had enlarged, and on February 7, 2020, I had my third and hopefully final, heart surgery. This time I had a ROSS procedure... my pulmonary valve was put into my aortic valve, I have a donor valve in my pulmonary valve and they rebuilt part of my aorta. My husband says I now have a bionic heart.

Now, I am no spring chickie anymore, but I thought I would bounce back from the surgery better than I did. One morning in the hospital, a new doc came in to see me. He told me that now that the "plumbers were done with me, it was time for an electrician." One of the side effects of the ROSS procedure is that you might require a pacemaker and that was why I was not bouncing back like I should have. So I now have a pacemaker to boot!



I was not allowed to ride until September 1, 2020. Needless to say, I was on a horse that day! I feel great and walk an average of 18,000 to 20,000 steps a day with my dog. I hike, bike, kayak, travel and just enjoy life.

As my mom says: "this is not a dress rehearsal!"





LUCK + ADVOCACY FOR SUCCESS

by Simona Thimot, British Columbia

Coronary Artery Disease, NSTEMI MI, 2021, and
Coronary Microvascular Dysfunction, 2023

My favorite quote is:

“Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space lies our freedom and power to choose our response.”

- Victor Frankl, 1946, Man’s Search for Meaning

My little narrow downtown neighbourhood street is totally blocked by three emergency vehicles, lights flashing lights. 14 people are in my living room.

It's December 2023, and I've been experiencing daily (at rest) chest pain for the last week. I have microvascular dysfunction (MVD), a rare (or rarely diagnosed) chronic cardiac condition. Chest pain at rest is not typical for me. Numerous medical folks have sternly told me to call 911 if I can't mitigate the pain with nitro; I'm reluctant because I live half a block from the cardiac care centre but for the first time in my 60 years, I call.

This became my second journey into the opaque world of cardiac care.

In May 2021, after being sent home the previous day without a diagnosis, I was admitted to hospital. I'd had an NSTEMI Myocardial Infarction (MI): no-one explained that this is a

type of heart attack. After being monitored for a few days, I was transferred to the cath lab day ward; they inserted one stent and released me. I was given angioplasty care instructions and told to see my doctor next week - I did not have a primary care provider (PCP). I did not receive the cardiac information package nor a cardiac rehab referral. This began an ongoing journey of self advocacy and, frankly, luck.

I was lucky that the urgent care clinic was able to take me for that post discharge appointment. I was lucky that a partner of my no longer practicing doctor agreed to complete medical leave forms and refer me to cardiac rehab. I was lucky that I discovered a lifestyle medicine clinic who helped me with nutrition, exercise and general knowledge.

However, it took a combination of research, advocacy and persistence to find and leverage these resources.

During cardiac rehab, I experienced seemingly inexplicable chest pains. The Medical Director referred me to a women’s heart health and MVD expert in Vancouver. Over a year after my MI, I was diagnosed with MVD and referred back to a local cardiologist. I saw her a few times before being discharged (still with no PCP).

My December 2023 visit to the emergency resulted in a referral to the local cardiologist I had previously seen. She asked me to not trigger symptoms until we knew what was going on. So, I could only walk for about five minutes, stairs and inclines were a problem, as was carrying anything with any weight. I basically sat in my recliner for most hours of the day for over five months.

She did not diagnose me, however treated my ongoing angina with medications typically used for MVD. Ranolazine (an antianginal) dosage adjustments take up to six weeks to calibrate so it was an 18 week journey to find the right dosage - a period during which I had a combination of regular angina and debilitating side effects. I was referred back to the Vancouver expert who, in June 2024, diagnosed a significant MVD escalation.

Living with a rare and relatively newly identified chronic cardiac condition is an ongoing challenge. Discerning, and thus being able to

manage, what triggers the angina is difficult because it’s not consistent. I track symptoms and triggers carefully but mitigate how often I do it for my mental health. Ranolazine not being well understood by the broader medical community is another obstacle. I only have about six to seven hours a day where I can plan to do those things I took for granted, and no one can answer whether I will ever get better.

There’s also limited research on the efficacy of cardiac rehab for MVD patients. I’m going into my second round of rehab - it’ll be interesting whether rehab alone increases my functional time. It’s unbelievably frustrating to know I can do a bit more, but know if I do, I’ll be laid up for hours or days.

I am so grateful to have access to such fantastic cardiologists and other practitioners who make up the medical team I’ve built. However, I only see my cardiologists intermittently, get treatment, and then am discharged so there is no regular followup and I don’t have anyone who can answer health questions that require MVD expertise.

All that said, I’m alive. I live in an amazing country with universal healthcare; it’s got its challenges so I’ve become very good at advocacy. Canada’s leading expert in my disease is relatively easily accessible,



and I have become ill at a time when women’s heart health and patient voices are coming to the forefront. Will I ever get my career back? Will I ever be able to look after my grandkids for the whole day? Will I ever be able to travel without significant guardrails to minimize energy drain? No-one knows!

I live in hope and celebrate incremental improvements.





A PRECIOUS GIFT...

by Barb Kolomi, Manitoba
Heart Transplant, 2012

My favourite quote is by an author:

“Love and fear are the only two emotions we have. From love flows happiness, contentment, peace and joy. From fear comes anger, hate, anxiety and guilt. No one knows why things happen in our lives. Living requires humility, for life is a mystery. All will be revealed in its own time.”

In 2012, I was a healthy and active 47 year old who suffered a Spontaneous Coronary Artery Dissection, or SCAD heart attack. I went into cardiac arrest for 20 minutes. Doctors told my family if I did survive, I could have multiple organ failure or brain damage due to lack of oxygen to my brain. At that time, SCAD (I will let you look it up) was not well studied and somewhat elusive to the medical community. Many medical staff were not familiar with SCAD. The last twelve years of awareness and continuing education is now changing this.

In the first week, I received mechanical interventions in an effort to save my heart including ECHMO and an Impella pump (two more to look up). Implantation of a Left Ventricular Assist Device (LVAD) was necessary in order for my survival. I was told the LVAD was

a bridge to a heart transplant. Once I was conscious, I heard everything doctors were telling me, but it was all incomprehensible. One day I was camping with my boys and the next I was in hospital fighting for my life.

Throughout my heart failure journey, I had three separate hospital stays totalling ten months, six surgeries (five were open heart), as well as several secondary illnesses including strokes, a pulmonary embolism, sepsis, and the eventual amputation of my left foot and all the toes on my right foot.

I developed blood clots in my feet after my LVAD surgery and my body was shutting down. For a week, doctors didn't know what was causing the necrosis in my feet. They told my husband there wasn't anything they could do, and to

prepare for the worst. A doctor from the University of Manitoba reviewed my file, ran a battery of tests which determined I had developed HITT (heparin induced thrombosis). My whole body had been infused with Heparin for a week, which was slowly killing me. They switched blood thinners but the damage was done. I survived, but this critical illness caused by their missed diagnosis cost me my foot and toes.

My illness took all of my mental and physical strength to heal, to the detriment of my family. My husband Glen was now mom and dad to our 12 and 15 year old boys, as well as having to work and be at the hospital. Glen was quite simply as the Queen put it “My strength and stay.”

I went home after a 3 ½ months in hospital and returned six months later when my necrotic feet became infected. Surgery was completed to remove my foot and toes.

One evening about two weeks after my amputation surgery, my husband visited to tuck me in and say goodnight. He noticed the RPM’s in my LVAD were slowing down to the point of shutting down. He alerted staff who alerted surgeons and I was rushed into surgery to replace my LVAD with a new one. The doctor discovered blood clots had developed in the machine causing it to shut down.

I thank God for my husband’s presence that night or I may not be here telling my story. I spent another 3 ½ months in hospital recuperating from my two surgeries.

I struggled emotionally after my amputation surgery. I was grieving the loss of a physical part of myself. As a highly motivated person who worked hard recovering from my first hospital stay, my physiotherapist struggled to help me. Doctors advised I was physically ready to go home but needed to walk first. My discharge was in my therapist’s hands.



My son’s 13th birthday was coming and I desperately wanted to be home for him. This finally motivated me to walk enough with my temporary prosthetic to go home.

I lived a fairly normal life with my LVAD for another 2 years until my machine developed electrical problems. I went back in hospital and was bumped to the top of the transplant list. Doctors kept me on batteries hoping my pump would hold out until a heart became available. I spent 2 ½ months waiting until the call for a heart finally came.

My surgery in Edmonton went without a hitch, and the silver lining was I had my same surgeon who performed my previous three surgeries in Winnipeg. It took a long time to heal, but with recovery came the realization of this special gift I received.

My new normal created a new life path. I spend my time volunteering with Transplant Manitoba and my HeartLinks group while keeping myself fit at the Wellness Centre. I am almost nine years post transplant and I am here because my organ donor gave the gift of life.





LISTEN TO YOUR INTUITION...

by Lynda Diamond, British Columbia

Spontaneous Coronary Artery Dissection (SCAD), 2018

My favourite quote is:

“Bloom where you are planted.”

I have had the privilege of living in Newfoundland, Quebec, Ontario, Alberta, and now British Columbia. Embracing life and all the opportunities and friendships it brings has always been my guiding principle.

In 2018 I was 59 years old living an active lifestyle on Vancouver Island regularly playing pickleball, hiking the west coast trails in addition to cooking in remote fishing lodges. Thankfully that spring, I was still at home prior to the opening of the lodge where I would leave to cook for the summer months at the beginning of June.

That day, I woke up feeling a bit ‘off’ and slightly nauseated as I was preparing for my daily game of pickleball. Even my morning coffee tasted strange, adding to my sense of unease and a nagging feeling that something wasn’t quite right. An inner voice was urging me to step outside and see who was around and to unlock the doors. Although I tried to calm myself, that feeling of unease remained, so I decided to reach out to a neighbour for a ride to our local clinic. He reassured me that I was fine, as I’m active and fit,

but I knew deep down that I needed to listen to my body and seek help even though I was not experiencing any pain.

When we arrived at the clinic, I was directed to the waiting room, but I felt compelled to go directly into the emergency room. The staff quickly set me up on an EKG, which showed a normal reading with just a slightly elevated heart rate. They reassured me everything seemed fine and suggested monitoring for an hour. But my intuition was alert and insistent that something was wrong. Within 20 minutes, I began to feel myself slipping away and could see a flurry of activity in the room but I felt completely detached as though watching a movie. Thoughts of my granddaughter, born just two days prior, filled my mind, and I knew this was not the right time to leave this world.

I experienced what could be described as a brief life review, feeling at peace despite the situation. Shortly after, I woke up and mentioned to the doctor that I had dreamt someone was giving me CPR. He kindly explained that it wasn't a dream but that I had been revived with two defibrillator shocks and CPR. Following an angiogram, I was diagnosed with SCAD, a rare condition where a tear forms in the coronary artery, blocking blood flow and potentially leading to a heart attack or cardiac arrest. It's more common in women in their 40s or 50s who are typically fit, although it can occur at any age.

Just three days later, I was discharged with beta blockers and aspirin. While the recovery process, both physically and emotionally, presented challenges, I remained focused on trusting that everything would work out. Throughout my recovery, I continually reminded myself that trusting my intuition had been what

saved my life in the first place. I knew I needed to keep that trust in myself moving forward.

Nine months later, after completing a Cardiac Rehabilitation program and a Cognitive Behavioural Therapy program, I was back to playing pickleball, more confident than ever and soon playing at my usual level.

Though there is still much to learn about SCAD, I strongly believe that stress and unresolved trauma can contribute to cardiac events like this.



For me, I think the incident stemmed from grief that I hadn't fully processed. I believe that if emotions aren't resolved, they can manifest as physical illness.

My journey has been a powerful reminder of the importance of listening to your body, trusting your intuition, and seeking help when needed. Life is precious, and taking action early can truly make all the difference.

I will be celebrating 7 years since my cardiac arrest this coming May. I definitely have a new lease on life and we often say my oldest grand daughter and I celebrate our birthdays together as she will be 7 in May. Life is precious and this experience has reminded me to embrace each day we are given. I continue to enjoy an active lifestyle hiking, playing pickleball, knitting, catering but mostly enjoying my 4 grand children and our family.



ABOUT US

HeartLife has evolved from a heart failure organization into one of North America's leading patient-led cardiovascular charities — because all roads lead to heart failure. Our mission is to raise public awareness of cardiovascular diseases, empower patients, families, and caregivers through education and support, and advocate for better care for everyone.



- FB Community
- Academy
- Advocacy





LIVING BEYOND EXPECTATIONS

by Mimi Disher, British Columbia

CHD diagnosis - TGA, Double-Outlet Right Ventricle and VSD Fontan Heart Repair and Pacemaker in 1994
Congested Heart Failure and Arrhythmias in 2012

My favourite activity is:

Spending time with family and friends. I still have a handful of friends that I have known from my childhood who have accepted me for who I am and my limitations. With support of family and friends, I would not have been able to live the wonderful life I have had.

I am 67 yrs old and I was born a Blue Baby in Boston, MA in 1957. At the time there was not any treatment available for my condition and I was baptized at 3 days old. My mom was given advice by Dr. Nadal at Boston Children’s hospital that I was a fighter and that over time technology would become available to help me.

Thirty-six years later, I had a Fontan Repair, then a few months later, my first pacemaker by Dr. Hillel Laks a Cardiothoracic surgeon and professor at Univeristy of California, Los Angles (UCLA) Medical Centre.



So how did I survive without surgery before then?

Here is my story:

I was number 2 out of 7 kids so my parents were quit busy with other distractions. This allowed me to try and keep up with my siblings and when I was tired, I would rest as my body demanded it.

During the winter months in Boston, when I was in school, the district would send a cab to my house and another kid in our neighbourhood so we didn’t have to walk in the snow to the bus stop because of our health issues.

In 1966, my Dad got a promotion at work and we moved to Los Angeles, CA and settled in the San Fernando Valley. Because of my heart issues, LA County Schools made me attend Lokrantz Special Education Center, a school for handicapped children. Eventually I went to the same school as my siblings.

During my year at Lokrantz, I saw children that couldn't walk, talk and would have seizures. I learned a valuable lesson from this experience at the age of 9 yrs old, I was lucky and could physically do more than they could. It has humbled me my whole life.

Over the years my Mom would take me to specialists in the LA area for my heart checkup. One even suggested a mustard procedure might help me with my O2 stats as they were in the low 70s but there were lots of unanswered questions. My parents refused because I was very active despite my limits and I could



even swim the length of our pool underwater.

Eventually I went to Los Angeles Children's Hospital and was seen by Dr. Masato Takahashi, a congenital heart specialist until the age of 19. Under his care I was monitored on a yearly basis with the latest tests including an echocardiogram. Once I became an adult I was basically on my own and went to an adult cardiologist in the area I lived in.

At the age of 32 I had a brain abscess which landed me in the hospital. The hospital cardiologist didn't understand my heart defects. Dr. Takahashi lived close to the hospital I was in and came to see me. He saw that it wasn't my heart but there was an abscess in my brain on the left side. He got me transferred to UCLA under the care of Dr. Joseph Perloff. He was the founder of the new medical subspecialty congenital heart disease in adults.

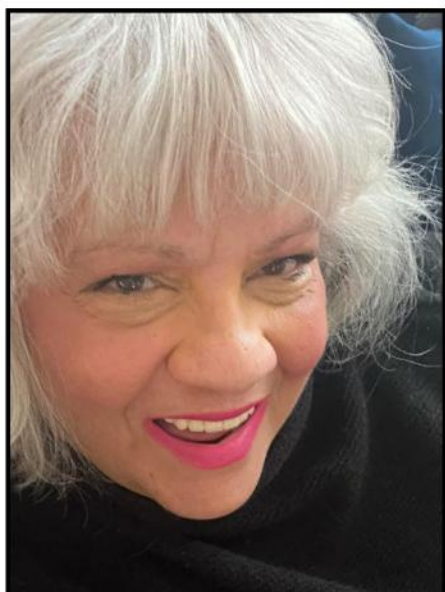
In Feb 1994 I suffered a TIA and was admitted to UCLA for observation for 2 days. During which I had the newest test, a transesophageal echocardiogram (TEE). This test got a clear picture of the anatomy of my heart and now they knew there was an option for surgery. Finally at the age of 36 the words of Dr. Nadal came to fruition.



Every birthday I say to myself, "I've fooled my doctors again." I embraced my limitations and got on with life. I got married at 21, became a mother after adopting 2 older siblings in my late 20s. I was able to work full-time after my surgery. I divorced, got remarried and lived in London, England for 3 years, before moving to Canada in 2004. My husband and I now have 6 grandchildren who live locally.

I have to say aging is not for the fool hearted, no pun intended! Lately, my time is spent dealing with various medical appointments with my CHD and how the Fontan repair affects my liver. But the added issues of an aging body has become a challenge. I'm now in the process of navigating this new normal and have the full support of my husband, John.





In Conversation...

FROM FEAR TO BYPASS AND LIFE

by Debra Sookdeo, Ontario
Quadruple Bypass, 2019

My Mantra is ...

"Do what I can today tomorrow is another day."

JR (Jackie Ratz): Thank you Debra for speaking with me for our Special February Issue... I am sure many will relate to what you went through...

DS (Debra Sookdeo): I had a quadruple bypass in July 2019 ... Two years prior I started to have stomach issues, like acid reflux ... I also had shoulder pain. Of course I went to my GP and he gave me prescription for meds ... they did not help so I went back after a few months... this time he said it was arthritis and gave me more meds... so then I was on 2 meds and neither seem to be helping.

JR: That must have been so tough to not feel any better after 2 meds are prescribed...

DS: Yup, I went back again... this is about a year... to send me a for a stress test... I think its nuclear test which came back negative. so he said to continue taking meds, that I am out of shape and to join a gym, change my diet ... ugh... so typical for a doctor to focus on weight. I struggled with on going pain and indigestion plus now I was experiencing chest pains and shortness of breath ...

JR: Struggling with your health for 2 years must have been exhausting... what happened that you finally got answers?

DS: I went back to him in May 2019 and he decided to send me for another stress test. This time the results were different.

He called me into his office and told me very casually you have blocked arteries, no further explanation given. He gave me a prescription for Plavix, an appointment with a cardiologist, an angiogram and, dismissed me. I went home not knowing much.

I did ask if I could keep going to the gym and he replied NO! You are at risk of a heart attack. I got so scared!

JR: Oh Debra ... such a scary time for you ...

DS: I took things easy for awhile then about two weeks after my chest was just racing ... my chest felt heavy was having back pain and my shoulder was heavy with jaw pain ...

DS Cont: ... I googled symptoms of heart attack for women I saw a different list than a men ... I had most of the symptoms so I went right away to emergency. Fortunately the cardiologist that GP made appointment with was working that day. When he saw me asked me what's going on I explained and he said he will admit me so I won't have to wait to get angiogram done. It was the Canada Day long weekend. And then I think it was about a week before I was finally assigned a surgeon.

JR: You were in the safest place at that point...

DS: On the 7 of July I had quadruple bypass. I had no idea what that meant ... I had no idea what to expect... a week after I was send home with a list of DOs and DON'Ts.

JR: WOW! I am surprised no one prepared you for such a big surgery before ... physically it is big, but emotionally too.

DS: No one prepared me for the emotional side of recovery. I cried for three months.

I remember seeing myself for the first time after surgery I was in so much pain and bruised ... I called myself a Frankenstein monster!

I had no appetite. All I did was take pills, sleep and cry. I couldn't walk from my bed to the bathroom without feeling dizzy.

JR: Big Hugs Debra... sounds like you had a real tough go of it all ... did you get any follow up help?

DS: I went to the doctors again. Told him how I was feeling... more drugs this time, for depression. Only they made me feel worse.

One day I got up from the couch to answer the phone and I passed out ... when I woke up on the living room floor I realized I passed out ... I stopped taking those pills ... I remember crying at the deli counter because I couldn't remember what I wanted ... until the kind server started listing the lunch meats and when she said ham I said "yes! Was so relieved!

JR: Brain fog, depression and side effects of our pills are all so hard on us ... I think it can be even tougher while we are physically healing and have the physical reminder... I wonder how you feel about your scar?

DS: This surgery has changed my femininity as a woman. I haven't been on a date in five years always so self conscious of my scars ... when I do go on a date and my scar on my chest is visible and asked what it is and I explained I don't get a second date. But now I've learned to accept they are not worth my time.

JR: It is now coming up on 5 years since your Quad bypass... how are you now?

DS: After five years I've leant that I can't control everything.

JR: I hope you had someone who was able to help you during your recovery?

DS: My son! He's my greatest blessing. He took care of me so so tenderly ... he switched his shift from days to evening so he could be home with me part of the day.



We take for granted so many things until we can't do these things ... I couldn't shower myself or get dressed or sleep on my side for six weeks. The first time I had a shower it felt like a million needles were stabbing me at once.

JR: What advice would you give someone who is facing having heart surgery?

DS: As a survivor of ovarian cancer (cancer free for 30 yrs) and without any sort of meds or treatments, I knew about recovery from surgery but heart surgery any form is different ... way more emotional.

JR: What do you like to do now?

DS: I love to walk when the weather permit. I live close to the lake and a beautiful trail. My recovery was during the hight of Covid ... couldn't go to physical therapy so I would walk. When I got stronger I joined the gym I loved lifting weights but now because of breathing issues I don't go to the gym... maybe someday.

I am truly truly blessed to be alive and I don't see myself as Frankenstein monster anymore but as a woman who's strong courageous and humble ... that when the chips were down, I dug deep down and came out a winner!





LISTEN TO YOUR HEART

by Tammy Proulx, Quebec

Coronary Microvascular Dysfunction, 2021

My happy place is ...

Spending quality time with my family and loved ones... Always surrounded by love, good food and lots of laughter."

My heart journey began back in 2017 when I was 39 years old. At the time, my career was in full swing, and I was a busy mom of 3 young kids. I had been having unusual chest pains and difficulty breathing for a few months, when I finally decided to talk to my family doctor. He told me that my pain was either muscular, or that I was suffering from anxiety and promptly gave me a prescription for anxiety medication.

I dismissed my symptoms, telling myself that my doctor knew best, and that I was probably over exaggerating. A few months later, as I was biking home from work, my chest pains suddenly came back full force. Luckily I was close to my local hospital, so I decided to bike over to the ER. An ECG was done (which was normal) and a blood test that identified elevated troponins. At this point, there was talk about a possible myocardial infarction which left me in shock. An angiogram followed, indicating that my heart was in perfect condition. After 5 days in

hospital, the cardiologist told me that I may have had myocarditis, and that I should rest, but would otherwise be fine.

Fast forward to a year later - same symptoms, another 4-day hospital stay and a similar diagnosis. I wasn't surprised when I started feeling the same tell-tale symptoms of chest pains and difficulty breathing the next year (this was becoming a yearly event!). Off I went to the ER again. This time they also did a cardiac echo and still found nothing. When I asked my cardiologist if I should be worried about these reoccurring symptoms, he told me that I had nothing to worry about and should just go 'live my life'.

Despite the doctor's diagnosis, I wasn't convinced. I felt like something in my body was off, and had felt that way since my first hospitalization, 3 years prior. I was also beginning to see a pattern. Every time I was going through a particularly stressful time in my life, my symptoms would come back.

On numerous occasions, throughout those years, I tried pushing for further testing – stating that there was a history of heart disease in my family. I had heard about Coronary Microvascular Dysfunction (CMD) when I was first hospitalized in 2017, but every time I raised this as a possibility, my cardiologist dismissed me, saying that I was too young, didn't fit the profile and that it just wasn't possible.

In June of 2021, my symptoms reappeared full force. I knew the drill - it was time to go to the ER. This time however, my partner insisted that we go to the Civic Hospital, where the Heart Institute is located, a little further from my home. Once at the ER, the same tests were done with the same results. But this time – I pushed. I told the cardiologist that I had been going through a particularly stressful time and this seemed to be a trigger for my heart symptoms and insisted that they explore further.



Surely it wasn't normal for me to be hospitalized 4 years in a row with a heart issue only to be told that it was unrelated to my heart!

Luckily the cardiologist on site listened to me and had me do a second angiogram. While the angiogram itself was inconclusive, the doctor decided to push further and did a coronary reactivity test. That is how I was finally diagnosed with CMD. My cardiologist later told me that all those cardiac episodes I was having over the past 4 years were in fact mini heart attacks!

I remember feeling scared after my diagnosis, but also relief. Relief that someone had finally listened to me – that I wasn't over-reacting or suffering from anxiety.

It was difficult accepting my diagnosis and my new 'normal' at first. My husband bought me an e-bike, but it took me a year to accept that I couldn't ride a normal bike anymore. However, I was very fortunate to be surrounded by an excellent team of doctors at the Heart Institute as well my family and loved ones. I took part in all of the rehab programs and support groups offered and it really helped me cope with everything.

Three years post diagnosis, I am still working full time, and have been blessed with a new blended family



with five teenagers at home. Slowing down isn't always an option, but one thing my heart journey taught me is to listen to your heart – literally. While I may not have a PhD in medicine, I have amassed a wealth of knowledge about my own body these past 40+ years and that should always count for something!

Finally coming to terms with my diagnosis has helped me enjoy every single moment – every day is a gift I get to spend with my family and loved ones and I'm taking advantage of every single day – being with my family, travelling and enjoying life!





IT CAN'T BE...

by Aleksandra Manov, Ontario (now Manitoba)
Heart Attack, 2017

My happy place is ...

Swimming. I love swimming so much. My dream is to live beside lake or ocean. Dancing is my second passion as I love dance music so much, especially the 80s.

Dear heart warriors,

It is hard to talk about my heart journey because it brings back memories that is impossible to forget and hard to accept.

My life took an unexpected turn and it is a story I would like to share with all of you because it may help somebody one day.

I worked a lot after my husband died and was feeling constantly tired but I thought it was normal.

One of my coworkers noticed that during break time I would fall asleep leaning on my hand. I just felt I needed that 10 minutes nap to be able to finish my shift.

Many times during night I would woke me up sharp pain in my heart that lasted a couple of minutes but because the nature of my job was heavy, I assumed it was my rib cage.

One day I had a burning sensation on the right side of my neck and I went to see a doctor. I had so many problems with my right tonsils, I was often on antibiotics and I assume that was the problem but doctor told me it all looks good.

I was wondering why its only right side of my neck so I ask for second opinion and I was given same answer.

Saturday morning I woke up very tired with light burning in my chest and pressure. Since I have asthma I decided to take my Ventolin inhaler but it did not help me.

I had to do some groceries shopping and while walking outside I was feeling more pressure in my chest and more persistent burning.

First thing on my mind was it must be some acid reflux even though I knew I did not eat or drink anything that may cause this.

I decide to go into a walk in clinic cause it was close to me. Doctor told me to keep taking the Ventolin and he prescribed some prednisone and said I need to have CT of my chest.

I ask him, "But why is it burning?" He told me to talk to my family doctor as it may be related to my lungs.

I sat outside of his office feeling helpless and again very tired.

Night time comes and I was getting ready to sleep, I took a shower and while dressing up I got cold sweat that comes from nowhere.

I went to bed and woke up with same feeling of tiredness and burning but decided to go to work anyway and that was the best decision I made.

I got my coffee and I tried to enjoy it before my shift but this time it did not taste same, something was different.



Walking from the parking lot to my workplace (hospital) it was challenging as I had to stop, drop my bag and take another Ventolin puff because I was gasping for air. My chest was tight and I knew something must be wrong beside asthma.

My shift begins and I was grabbing my chest many times while walking and after two hours I decide to go and talk to a nurse in the ER and ask her for her opinion since the waiting room was empty (thank goodness).

Soon as I told the nurse about my symptoms she decide immediate to do ECG and blood test and I went back to work.

My pager went off half hour later and she said I needed to come back to emergency department.

I did not have any idea that on September 4, 2017 my life will be changed forever.

Hearing the words from emergency doctor I will never forget.

I heard those scary words : "You are having a heart attack!"

"Oh no doctor I do not want to die... not me, no way ... I have two children, they have lost their father, they can not lose me ...NOOOO!"

I remember the nurse calling my supervisor asking him to come down to the ER. I remember him holding my hands and doctor saying to me, "Your shift, it is over."

But how to tell my kids? Will I die? Will I hug my kids again? So many unknown questions and no answers.

Heart attack in my mind sounded like: YOUR LIFE IS OVER!

I know that Hamilton General hospital emergency department team saved my life. I got an amazing amount of love and support from the emergency doctor, the nurses, the technicians, and my coworkers - it is hard to describe what that meant to me.

I am forever grateful to still be here and to be able to share my story.

Do not depend on anybody to tell you when to go to ask for help. You are not being paranoid if they send you home without answer.

Age means nothing - I was 48, I could not imagine having a heart problem. It can happen - sometimes genetics or perhaps in my case that together with stress...

I have only one important piece of advice for you ...

LISTEN TO YOUR BODY !





TOP OF THE LINE PLEASE...

by Wanda Crawley, Nova Scotia

Heart Disease: AFIB / PACEMAKER, 2022

Something most people don't know is

How much I now love gardening (and how dirty I can get)! I also love to travel and I'll get on a plane to go almost anywhere (especially if there is a beach or snorkelling involved)!

My heart journey began literally two weeks following my retirement on April 1, 2022.

I had some extra vacation to use prior to my retirement and we went to Cuba the end of March to celebrate my retirement. Upon my return, I thought my “Fitbit” wasn’t working properly so I decided to invest in a new device and purchased an Apple Watch with money gifted to me by my lovely co-workers.

Within a couple days of purchase, my watch started sending me warnings stating that if I had not previously been diagnosed with AFIB I should seek medical attention. The first couple of days I pretty much ignored the warnings but on April 12, 2022 I decided that I should probably go to Emergency.

The AFIB warnings were legit and I was immediately given medication to assist in getting me back in

rhythm. The medications were unsuccessful and I ended the evening with a cardio conversion and was then sent home (they said a referral to a cardiologist would be sent and an appointment should be made fairly quickly).

Over the next few days, I ended up in emergency daily and on April 17 (my birthday), I was rushed by ambulance to hospital and finally admitted.

Everyone agreed that I needed to see a cardiologist but we continued trying various medications and an internal medicine physician took over my care. The medications weren’t doing the trick – my heart rate continued to be an issue and the AFIB certainly wasn’t going away on its own!

My journey continued throughout May with several more trips to emergency (they started calling me the Apple Watch Lady) and several more cardio

conversions (13 in total). On May 19 I refused to leave the hospital until I had an appointment with a cardiologist. I was promised a phone call the next day.

When the cardiologist called me (the next day as promised), she had read my file and advised that I needed to have a pacemaker! She advised that I could have a “regular” pacemaker implanted quickly. She however mentioned that there was a new “Dual Chamber Leadless Pacemaker” that was ready for trial and asked if I’d be interested in being the first woman in Nova Scotia to participate in the trial. I was newly retired and figured that if I had to have a pacemaker, I might as well have the newest “model” available.

My surgery took place on June 27, 2022 and I’ve had no further trips to emergency! My pacemaker has been working wonderfully and the recovery time was quick. I now

take a blood thinner and medication for AFIB which, along with my pacemaker, have kept me doing well!

A friend recently wrote a song and my favourite line is, “it’s not about the days in your life but the life in your days!” After experiencing this journey it certainly makes you realize that it is about the life in your days! I try to make the most of each day.

Retirement is going well. We’ve been fortunate to go on a few trips (including Hawaii which was a top bucket list item) and enjoy spending extra time with our family and three grandchildren (who certainly keep us busy)!

Quote: “Be grateful for every second of every day that you get to spend with the people you love.”



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LIFE WITH STROKE & HOLES IN MY HEART.

by Natalie Perrier, British Columbia
Congenital Heart Disease and Stroke, 2021

Quote that inspires me:

"Once you make a decision, the universe conspires to make it happen."

It was November 18, 2021. It was a normal day, Thursday to be exact, and I had a staff meeting. I am a teacher in the primary school system. I didn't want to be at the staff meeting because I was exhausted and I had to prepare dinner and I didn't know how I could pull it off. I was so tired.

When I finally got home, I went to put my lunch bag in the cupboard, I collapsed. I woke up three days later in the ICU.

Luckily, my daughter Camille, my husband Marc, and my daughter's best friend, Sydney, were there. Sydney was at the table working away on applications to universities. When I collapsed my world, and my families, changed forever. Sydney called Camille and Camille called Marc. Camille called the ambulance while Marc and Sydney came on the floor where I was.

Sydney stroked my hair while Marc was on the phone with his brother Ramiro, who is a doctor, telling him that I was having a stroke.

Camille was busy going to the end of the driveway to direct the ambulance. It took twenty minutes for the ambulance to get here. I was 55 years old and my life was going to be forever changed.

Chapter 2

When we got to the hospital, I was whisked immediately down the hallway to the operating room. The neurosurgeon asked Marc if I had a DNR (do not resuscitate). That's when it all hit him, the danger I was in was very real.

I don't know how long I was in the operating room ... I can only imagine how Marc must have felt waiting to hear something. After the emergency operation, (they removed a clot from my head), I was taken to the ICU where I would stay for 5 days.

Marc stayed busy on the phone talking to his brother and to Dr. Ku. It was Dr. Ku who suggested that I needed an MRI of my leg to rule out a DVT (deep

vein thrombosis) in my right leg. Lo and behold, I HAD a DVT in my leg! The clot went through the hole in my heart. I would need an operation but not now.

How lucky am I that a friend's father is a well respected neurosurgeon! Marc phoned Gwen who gave the phone number for her papa ... the neurosurgeon of Kelowna General Hospital was quite impressed that we knew Dr. Oger, they had studied under him.

Marc in the meantime, endured a tremendous amount of stress because the medication I was on came with a 50% chance that it could kill me! I can't imagine what he went through.

Chapter 3

When I woke up three days later, I was paralyzed on my right side. I couldn't talk and I couldn't walk. Marc told me that my foot had moved after three days so there was hope.

My friends Tracey and Dwayne work at the hospital. Tracey put together a picture board of me and various people in my life, including themselves. She put it on the wall at the end of my bed. Every time someone came into the room, they would say: "You know Tracey and Dwayne?!" Tracey and Dwayne came to visit every chance they got.

I spent 5 days in the ICU. Followed by 4 days in the stroke wing and 3 weeks in rehabilitation. While I was

in the stroke wing I started on the recumbent bike and I was only able to pedalled for five minutes before I would need a nap. Other times, Marc took me around to pieces of coloured paper that were stuck to the walls on the stroke wing, so I could practise saying the colour. Marc was with me all the time, he would only go home to sleep. It was a slow process.

Camille came to the hospital every day. She would comb my hair or she would do some speech with me or she would just sit with me and we would watch a movie. It's because of her that I tried so hard to get better.

Chapter 4

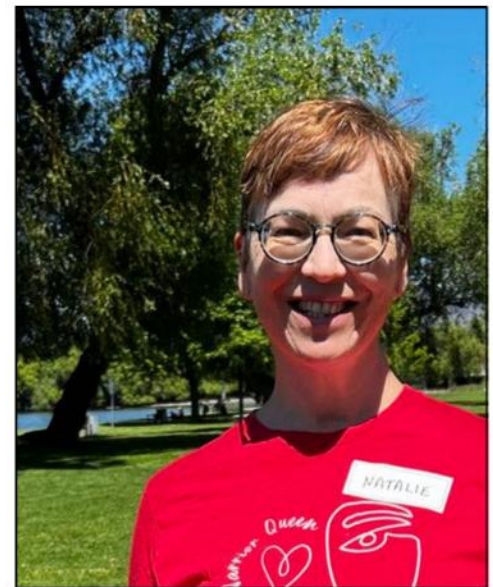
My friend (sister from another mother) Gwenaëlle came to visit me. I remember her holding my hand and talking to me with a smile on her face. It was so reassurance that she came and was so positive.

Once she realized there was no Speech Therapy in French she got working. She made a document for me with all the phonemes and words and even tongue twisters... I owe her a lot of gratitude. In turn, I gave it to my Speech Therapist to share with the other French speaking people.

Paule, a colleague and very good friend, also visited me in the hospital. One special moment was when she arranged to have other colleagues to come to the hospital and stand on the pavement below my window (I was on the fifth floor)

to form a heart and to wave and blow kisses.

Another friend, Lisa would make me eat and do speech with me. When Marc could not be with me, she would come and work on speech or therapy with me. I am so grateful for all the support I (and Marc) had.



On my first day in rehab, they said that I needed to get dressed. I remember thinking: "How am I going to do that? My arm is paralyzed!" I got dressed, it took a long time, I felt amazing!

In rehab there is a gruelling schedule. You have Speech Therapy, Occupational Therapy and Physiotherapy every week day. Marc and my brother-in-law made sure that I worked my hand on the weekend too and my brother-in-law made sure that I would walk. Every day I would nap between every type of therapy.

I had to learn how to swallow so food was not too appealing but I ate anyway because I needed to get stronger. Eating took me 45 minutes. If you multiply by 3 you have 1:15, plus the 3 hours of therapy, plus the fact that I needed to sleep between therapies that doesn't leave anytime for something else!

In speech therapy I had to relearn my alphabet. I was eager to learn so that I could move on with my life. It's been 3 years and I am still working on my speech.

Physiotherapy was the highlight of my therapy because I could see improvement in my arm. In OT, when the time came to give me an adapted cutting board with sides and nails in the middle where you could put your fruit or vegetable and an adapted knife, I was over the moon! I love cooking and that opened up all kinds of possibilities. The same thing happened when I was shown how to clip my nails. That in itself gave me the biggest boost of confidence. Independence is a big thing for me.

Chapter 5

After Christmas, I had a lot of friends that wanted to visit. It was at that time that Marc received an email from the March of Dimes stating the programs they had to offer.

My friends would come and sit with me and encourage me to talk. Every day I had someone that would come. I slept a lot during those days.

So many friends stepped up and helped Marc and I as I worked to recover and he went back to work.

Chapter 6

Finally in July it was decided I was ready to get my Laparoscopic heart surgery to repair the 2 holes in my heart.

I was born with the holes and what was called a murmur - Now we call it mitral valve prolapse. I was fortunate to be asymptomatic for a long time. I should add that my heart condition was not the cause of my stroke. It was a deep vein Thrombosis in my leg that caused it.

In my 5 hour surgery, they blocked the 2 holes, repaired my valve and did an ablation as I was in Afib. You could say it was more than an oil change!

The week before my surgery, I was quite agitated, thankfully I had been working on mediation with Leah. We also focused on how to breathe post surgery because when you have open heart surgery you can only breathe shallowly for 6 weeks until the rib heals. My surgery would mean that the work I did on my arm would be delayed by 6 months. I was not happy about that but we didn't have a choice.

My surgery was on the 21st of July. I stayed 5 days in the hospital. I received my chest pressure red heart pillow from the hospital ladies auxiliary... The thought of these

ladies sewing heart pillows warms my heart so much... so kind.

I further recuperated for a week at my brother in laws in Kingston. I would lie in the solarium, close my eyes and listen to the birds sing and think about how blessed I was. My sister in law was incredible. She took really good care of me. I did daily walks to their mailbox at the end of the driveway and I would do my best to do more every time I went out.

Chapter 7

I did a 7 week program called "Life after Stroke." Each week we had a presentation on a topic, we got to ask questions and we laughed... a lot. I have since also got involved with other self help stroke initiatives, have taken steps to improve my physical strength and now volunteer with many different stroke organizations.

I also wrote a book called "Anatole" (see anatolebook.ca) and am excited to be presenting to a school in 2025... I LOVE MY LIFE!

Epilogue...

Top learnings of my journey with heart disease and stroke:

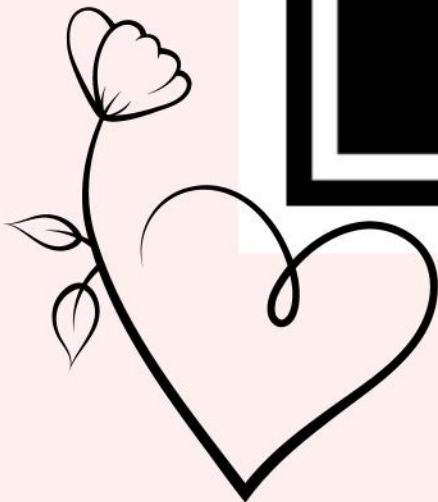
- I treat my stroke as a gift - I see much more clearly
- I take the bull by the horns!
- Mindfulness saved me when I could not talk or walk and I am still doing it!



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