

double blessing double blessing

by Jon Caswell

No question about it, open-heart surgery is a life-changing event, but for John Salamone it was just the beginning. “Never in my wildest dreams could I imagine what was to unfold after my heart surgery,” says John, 35, of Alexandria, Virginia, and a member of Chapter 200.

John was no stranger to open-heart surgery when he was scheduled to undergo the Maze procedure and have his mitral valve repaired four years ago. Born with an atrial-ventricular canal defect, he had surgery to correct it at age 7. He had a normal childhood after that. Within a year he was playing soccer and continued playing through college. He even plays today. However, in December 1998, he was diagnosed with atrial fibrillation, as his mitral valve had gone from mild regurgitation to severe. He had his second surgery at the Cleveland Clinic on March 28, 2000, his 31st birthday.

Familiarity with open-heart surgery could not prepare him for the next challenge. Four days before John’s surgery, his wife Jeannine found a lump in her breast. “I was so preoccupied with John’s operation,” she says, “that the lump didn’t seem like something to worry about.” She didn’t mention it to John until they returned to Alexandria two weeks later. By that time, the lump was bigger and more painful.



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“Given her age (29 at the time), we weren’t that stressed about it,” says John. “But we decided that the best thing was to go to the doctor.” Jeannine saw her gynecologist the next day and went back for a follow-up the next week, then went for a sonogram and a mammogram. The mammogram showed suspicious cells, and she went for a fine-needle aspiration (a less invasive alternative to surgical biopsy) to gather cells from the lump. The day before her 30th birthday, six weeks after John’s surgery, Jeannine was diagnosed with breast cancer.

“It was devastating,” says Jeannine.

“Her cancer hit me a lot harder than my open-heart surgery,” says John. “We were in complete shock and disbelief, and I feared I would lose her in a couple of weeks. I may not have known anything about breast cancer at the time, but I certainly knew what it was like to be a patient, so I tried to help her cope with that aspect as much as possible. However, one of the hardest things for me was the timing of her diagnosis, because I went from being a patient to a caregiver before I was even allowed to drive.”

Instead of a mastectomy, Jeannine underwent a lumpectomy, a less invasive treatment. The doctor removed the tumor and nine cancerous lymph nodes, but a second surgery was required when tests revealed that malignant cells remained. Then there was six months of chemotherapy, followed by seven weeks of radiation. After all her treatment, Jeannine decided to undergo a double mastectomy and reconstructive surgery. Today, she is taking tamoxifen, a breast cancer prevention drug.

“The cancer was a setback, but we learned to deal with it one day at a time, one appointment at a time,” says John. “I wanted to be active in her care, and the best way for me to do that was to educate myself and deal with the information we had at the time.”

He went to every doctor’s appointment and was there for the surgeries.

“Even in our darkest days, we tried to comfort each other with humor and compassion,” he says. “Not many husbands can say that they have shaved their wife’s head; in my case, I’ve done it twice. I’ve never stopped telling her how much I love and admire her, but during her treatment I tried to do other things to let her know how much I cared. For instance, I put a sign up on our bathroom mirror that said, ‘Bald is beautiful. Life is beautiful. Jeannine is beautiful.’”



“I always knew we had a strong connection, and that was reinforced when we were together during the hardest times of our lives. Being a patient made me a better caregiver both emotionally and spiritually. I could help her because I knew what it was like to be in the hospital and to face the unknown. One thing we’ve learned through all of this is that none of us knows what tomorrow will bring, but these experiences made us even closer than we were before. Together, we take our lives one day at a time and don’t project too far into the future.”

To seek support prior to his surgery, John joined Mended Hearts. “I

joined to help work through some of the mental aspects of heart surgery, and talking to those who had gone through it really helped. I was taken by the outpouring of support and felt I needed to give something back. So, when there was an opening for publicity chairman of Chapter 200, I did not hesitate to volunteer. It seemed like such a perfect fit.”

After working on a successful media campaign to promote the Virginia legislature’s designation of Valentine’s Day as “Mended Hearts Day,” John got involved with the organization on a national

level as the Public Relations Chairman. Today he is serving as the Lobbying, Legislative and Legal Chairman. This is a good match because John already works on Capitol Hill as a professional staff member of the Subcommittee on the Oversight of Government Management.

ence to give back to a committed group of heart patients who have their own stories to tell. I am honored and fortunate that the American Heart Association asked me to speak. In the beginning Jeannine and I felt a little cursed, but today we know how lucky we are. I hope my words and our story inspired those who attended the luncheon, because Jeannine and I feel compelled to share our story in an effort to help others.”

That is a theme in the Salamone’s relationship — giving back by helping others. In addition to John’s work with Mended Hearts, Jeannine is active in the fight against breast cancer. Four years after her diagnosis

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He also serves as a liaison between Mended Hearts and the American Heart Association. He participated in the AHA’s recent Congressional Heart and Stroke Lobby Day. He spoke at a Lobby Day luncheon where he told his story and gave pointers on how to talk to members of Congress. “I work on Capitol Hill, so I’m always meeting with various interest groups. It was great to be able to use that experi-

she is doing fine and has no evidence of the disease. She will be profiled in an upcoming breast cancer documentary on the Discovery Health Channel in October. She is also very active with the Young Survival Coalition and the Virginia Breast Cancer Foundation. Ironically, John’s job required him to be in Cleveland on the fourth anniversary of his surgery. “The surgery was difficult and emotional but my return to the city this time was triumphant.

“We look at open-heart surgery and breast cancer as gifts that help us understand the importance of life. Jeannine and I have a very happy home together because of the mutual respect that comes as a result of the love and support we have given each other at the hardest times of our lives.” 💖