

One Bonus Day at a Time

by Jon Caswell



Sherry Shockley and husband Don especially enjoy bonus days with grandchild, Reilly.

It was snowing

in central Tennessee, and that was going to make things difficult. In fact, for Sherry Shockley of Cookeville, it could have proven fatal. But the 49-year-old mother of two didn't know about that when she woke up that Sunday morning. She didn't have any idea that by Wednesday night another person's heart would be beating in her chest.

She sent her husband Don off to church, and soon after felt a sudden crushing pain in her chest. She called the church office, and luckily someone answered and got a message to Don. He hurried home in the snowstorm, then rushed her to the local emergency room. There they pronounced the shocking, unimaginable diagnosis: heart attack.

Sherry was not the stereotypical heart attack patient. "I wasn't overweight and never had been," she says. "I was the healthy person in the office, always taking my lunch — carrot sticks and turkey sandwiches. I had had my blood pressure and cholesterol checked two weeks before, and both were just fine. In fact, I had just finished a heart attack risk study. This couldn't be happening to me."

Only it was, and it would get much more serious. She was admitted to the cardiac intensive care unit, where she got worse. The doctors induced a coma, intubated her and placed her on a balloon pump. Watching his wife slowly dying, Don requested that she be moved to Vanderbilt University Hospital where more options were available.

It was 80 miles to Nashville, and the doctors wanted to send her by helicopter early Tuesday morning, but it was still snowing. They sent her to Vanderbilt by ambulance, even though it had snowed so much only one lane was getting through on the freeway.

At Vanderbilt, she was taken immediately to surgery and put on a left ventricular assist device. When Don arrived with Tammy, their older daughter, he was told the only chance Sherry had was a heart transplant. Although she qualified for the transplant, her condition was critical. "They told my family I would only last 24 hours on those machines, and the chances of finding a heart that fast were slim."

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Don, Tammy and Shannon, their younger daughter, went to Tammy's apartment to grab some rest, but they didn't get any. The hospital called at 1:17 AM to tell them that only hours after being listed, they had found a heart. They had to be at the hospital by 4:30 to sign the papers that gave permission for the transplant; surgery was scheduled for 5. But before they could leave the apartment, the hospital called back. Sherry's condition had worsened, her blood pressure was too low, and they couldn't wait any longer. When the family reached the waiting room, they were told "Prepare for the worst, it will take a miracle."

It was now Wednesday morning and still snowing. Dr. Richard Pierson III, Sherry's surgeon, chartered a small jet and flew to Johnson City, Tennessee, to recover the heart himself. The donor was a 22-year-old woman who died of a brain aneurysm. On the way back to the plane, the ambulance carrying Dr. Pierson and the heart got stuck in the snow, and it was 9 AM before the heart arrived in the operating room at Vanderbilt. The surgery was to last 6–10 hours, but by 1 PM, it was complete, although they didn't close Sherry's chest till the next day because she was so swollen.

"Wow!"

Sherry had one collapsed lung and had developed pneumonia, neither of which is good in an immuno-suppressed transplant patient. But those seemed like small obstacles to overcome compared to everything else she had been through. For the first time in days, Don and the girls were hopeful.

Sherry finally woke up on Sunday, a week after she had called Don to come home from church. "When I came to, one of the girls said, 'Mother, you've had a heart transplant.' All I could say was 'Wow!' I didn't even know I was at Vanderbilt and couldn't believe a week had gone by, but most of all I couldn't believe I had had a transplant!"

She felt chained to the bed with all the tubes and wires coming out of her. And even though she'd survived, she didn't feel all that good. There were a couple of weeks of hallucinations and a lot of guilt over what her family had gone through. Over the next few weeks, her doctor sent other transplant patients to visit when

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Sherry knows firsthand the value of patient-to-patient visits.

“For me, every single day is a gift. I’m still basically the same person I was, but I appreciate small things more, and I’m upbeat every day regardless of what happens. After all, today is a bonus day.”

they came into the clinic for check-ups. “That probably helped as much as anything. They looked like normal people. They gave me hope.”

The next surprise were the biopsies, which involve going through the jugular vein into the right ventricle and taking five snips of tissue. She had 20 of these procedures the first year. “I always dreaded them, but I reminded myself that they were a small price to pay to be alive.”

After a couple of weeks in the cardiac unit, Sherry was moved across the street to a furnished apartment for transplant patients. There Don stayed with her till she was well enough to go home. She had been gone a total of two months, and it was an emotional homecoming.

During her time in the apartment, she was told that several cardiologists had met and reviewed the pathology report on her old heart and could not determine why she had had a heart attack. They said the damage was similar to that experienced by athletes who had heart attacks and died while playing a sport. “That was certainly not me. It was amazing that I had lasted long enough for a transplant.”

Can You Feel Love with Another Person’s Heart?

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At first Sherry was concerned whether she could actually feel love, but she found that wasn’t a problem when her first grandchild, Reilly



Keown, was born. “This is definitely my heart now.”

Sherry is often asked if she likes food or other things she didn’t like before, indications that she might have taken on the preferences of her donor. “The quick answer is no. At first a lot of food tasted different, but that was just a side effect of the medication.

“I went to cardiac rehab for several months and that helped me regain strength to do for myself. It took several years to get my medication right. For a long time I just felt OK but not really good. Most heart transplant patients feel bad before the operation and better afterwards, but not me. My muscles had atrophied and the medicine caused my red blood count to stay low, so I was very weak for a long time. I didn’t have the stamina to return to my job as a secretary at Tennessee Tech University.”

A Life of Bonus Days

Just four months after the operation, Sherry attended Tammy’s graduation from Vanderbilt

University School of Nursing. The next year she went to Shannon’s graduation with a Ph.D. from Mercer University Southern School of Pharmacy. As a result of her mother’s experience, Shannon went on to do a post-doctoral residency in transplant medicine. “I often tell people, ‘What a mother won’t do for her child’s career.’” Today Shannon works for Wyeth Pharmaceuticals.

After her transplant, Sherry and other heart patients started Mended Hearts Chapter 127 in their area. “I remembered how important those visits from other transplant patients had been to me right after surgery. Just having someone to call when you’re wondering if what you’re experiencing is normal and the opportunity to learn more about keeping your heart healthy at the monthly meetings were important reasons to get involved in Mended Hearts. It also provided a way to give back to someone else that comforting feeling when you need it most.”

In addition to Mended Hearts, Sherry volunteers with Tennessee Donor Services. “Most transplant patients don’t have the experience I had. They wait weeks, months, even years. There are so few organs and so many people waiting. You have to be the neediest or sickest but still strong enough to tolerate the surgery. That’s a fine line. If everyone who could be a donor would donate, there wouldn’t be an organ shortage. The donor families I’ve talked to said donating was the one good thing that came out of a tragedy.

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Mended
Little
Hearts

Completing the Journey

by Kari Crawford

I am a twin, and both my sister Kristen and I were born with a minor congenital heart defect that affected the conduction of electrical impulses in our heart. No one would have known this just to look at us. My early life and teen years were like many other teenagers — carefree, full of friends and school activities. I was captain of the cheering squad and on the honor roll.

Few knew that we had heart problems, but as we approached adolescence, my sister was diagnosed with Wolfe-Parkinson-White (WPW) Syndrome. This syndrome allows for a rapid re-entry of the electrical activity of the heart. A few years later I was diagnosed with the same condition. Several episodes of supraventricular tachycardia, hospital admissions, syncope and medications later, my twin and I had electrophysiology catheterization studies to map the arrhythmias. This really started our journey.

About two months later I had the extra “excitable” electrical fibers cut out of my heart via open-heart surgery. Kristen had her WPW pathway ablated in the cath lab via radiofrequency ablation two years after that.

After my heart surgery, an elderly gentleman handed me a key chain from Mended Hearts. As a fellow survivor, he also gave me another gift that has proven to be lifelong and invaluable. He gave me the gift of hope and told me I was going to be OK. That event made me want to help others the same way. Today, years later, I am a Pediatric Nurse Practitioner working with children prior to or following cardiac surgery. “My kids” have congenital defects much more complicated than mine. I have, however, found that all the families have a unique bond. That is what makes supporting one another so simple and so necessary.

When I was informed that Mended Hearts was creating Mended Little Hearts, I jumped at the opportunity to help. The Tinman Club was created here in North Carolina at Brenner Children’s Hospital in May 2004. We are still in the early stages, but I have already witnessed the hope parents bring to one another and the strong arm of support they offer when things do not go as expected. Congenital heart disease is the number one cause of defect-related deaths today. Whether it’s through medical support or giving a shoulder to cry on, helping these families has allowed me to complete the journey I started when I was born with a heart defect.

Some say “hearts” are in our blood, and we were born on Valentine’s Day. We believe that fate has brought us where we are today — me a pediatric nurse, and Kristen a speech language pathologist working with children. My sister and I feel blessed as we celebrate with these kids at our annual heart party or the Heart Walk. The Mended Little Hearts’ slogan, “Little hearts hold big hopes,” has held true in our family. We now graciously offer our hearts to the families in Mended Little Hearts so that all their dreams can come true. ❤️



Kari Crawford (right) and twin sister Kristen share Valentine’s Day as their birthday.