

Fighting the Good Fight... Again and Again

by Jon Caswell



“If it weren’t for MHI, I wouldn’t be here,” Dee said. “It’s made my life complete because now I’m able to help other people.”

At heart, Dee Eckert is a fighter, determined to overcome any challenge that comes her way, and yet she is deeply kind, shirt-off-her-back compassionate. Seems like an oxymoron – a compassionate fighter – but it’s the same contradiction many members of Mended Hearts embody: a good-hearted person struggling with a heart that’s not always as good as it should be.

At age 67, Dee lives in St. Louis with Harry, her husband, helpmate and caregiver of 47 years. Fourteen years ago, she didn’t know anything about heart disease because no one in her family had had it. Then 13 years ago, she started having terrible stomach pain. She went to the ER several times, where they gave her indigestion treatments like Maalox. For months her doctor treated her, unsuccessfully, for indigestion. One night the pain started and wouldn’t go away. She knew there was very little relief at the hospital and thought she could tough it out. But about 6 a.m., she woke Harry to take her to the hospital. “The pain was right under my breastbone, at the top of my stomach, so I was sure it wasn’t a heart attack,” she said. “But I had taken everything they’d given me, and the pain wouldn’t go away.”

Thinking she had indigestion, Harry called their daughter, Patty McGibany, to drive Dee to the hospital while he followed in his car so he could go on to work. On the way to the ER, Dee’s left arm went numb. “I said to my daughter, ‘Drive like the wind, I’m having a heart attack.’ Then I called the ER and told them what was happening, so they were ready for me when I got there.”

Whisked to the heart cath lab, they found three blockages, and Dee was put into ICU to stabilize her condition before surgery. The clot-busting drug tPA she was given to make her heart work more efficiently only resulted in a hematoma in her arm. She had terrible pain in her stomach and back. Finally, two days later, she was rushed down for emergency bypass surgery where they found three more blockages and replaced *six* coronary arteries.

On the day of the surgery, Harry and Patty waited from 2 pm to 7 pm. It was a long but not lonely wait, thanks to MHI. “In the CV



Dee at the 2007 convention



Dee and Harry, the love of her life



The Eckert family (l to r) Chris, Michele, Harry, Dee, Patty and John

waiting room was a man named Jim Hardt, a MHI visitor," said Dee. "He stayed with them the entire time, until I came out of surgery and they knew I was going to be okay. What Jim did for my family, you can't buy that kind of stuff. That's from the heart." (Jim Hardt is still visiting, and a regular participant in Chapter 120's activities.)

"I could not have made it through that experience without Harry and our daughters, Patty and Michele," said Dee. "Also, my sisters, Phyllis Ross and Patty Fitzgerald, took turns coming to my aid. They scheduled my meds, took me to doctors appointments, fed and bathed me, walked with me and generally boosted my spirits. It is crucial for all heart patients to have a strong support team behind them."

It wasn't long before Dee and Harry joined Chapter 120, and she started visiting in the Missouri-Baptist Medical Center cardiac waiting room. Dee fits that environment perfectly – respectful, compassionate, easy to talk to. Her family says no one's a stranger to Dee. "One day a woman was there by herself," Dee recalled. "She got some good news about her husband, and she came up and asked if she could hug me because she was so happy. We just stood there and hugged and cried. Later I found out they had joined MHI when they returned home."

Dee visited in the CV waiting room for three years before new health challenges arose: Sjogroen's disease, an auto-immune deficiency, and uterine cancer. She devoted her time and efforts to getting well before returning to serve others.

In 2004, she was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma in her stomach, lungs and lymph nodes. She went through one round of chemotherapy and the cancer went away...for a while. When it came back 12 months later, it came back in the same places. She had six doses of chemo, and again her cancer went into remission.

With a new outlook on life, Dee went back to volunteering with MHI. She and Harry have been "co-treasurers" for Chapter 120 ever since they joined a dozen years ago. Before the cancer diagnosis, Dee co-chaired (with Judy Fritz) the 2003 national convention in St. Louis,

and then she was the convention site director for two years. "I visited possible convention sites and evaluated them. I really enjoyed that job."

This past May, Dee went for a checkup, and a CT scan found the cancer had come back in her lungs. She was just about to go in for a second chemo treatment when she was interviewed for this story. "I have never asked why during any of this," she said. "God gave this to me so I could be a witness that a person can make it through even a heart attack and cancer. And with the prayers of so many people building me up, I've asked God to keep me alive till all my grandchildren have graduated from high school and college. That's at least 20 more years! I'll do my part, if God does His! I'm a walking, talking, vital person, and I'm fighting every day of my life. I've got faith that God will take care of me."

Vital – that's an accurate description of Dee. Her voice brims with excitement and passion. You can hear it when she talks about her family – she and Harry have four children, eight grandchildren and one great-grandchild. You can hear it when she talks about her PEZ dispensers – she has more than 500. And you can hear it when she talks about getting well – that's top of the list right now – and about MHI.

"If it weren't for MHI, I wouldn't be here," Dee said. "It's made my life complete because now I'm able to help other people. We let people know that there are others like themselves who have survived and are living a full life; anyone can do it, too. MHI really brings that message home. We live our motto – 'It's great to be alive and to help others.'"

Finally, no story about Dee would be whole without Harry. "Harry's been my stalwart during all of this," she said tearfully. "There hasn't been a day during our nearly 50 years together that he wasn't there for me. I've been able to stay active through all this because I've had Harry by my side, so I try to thank him every day. Without him, I'd feel like nothing, and I know he feels the same way – we complete each other. I'm not the hero in this story – Harry is, or should be!" ❤️