

World Record Holder Touches Hearts and Souls

by Jon Caswell



Tony Huesman and his sidekick Teddy Tenderheart

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Tony Huesman hasn't beaten the odds — he's annihilated them! Even in Mended Hearts, which is full of odds-beating people, Tony's heart story is remarkable: he's the world record holder.

This 50-year-old member of Chapter 61 from Dayton, Ohio is the longest living heart transplant patient with the same transplanted heart. He has lived 29 years with someone else's heart beating in his chest.

"Growing up, I was very active," he recalled. "I played baseball and football and got a checkup every year. Everything was fine. Then in my junior year at Archbishop Alter High School I got pneumonia, and I just couldn't kick it for several months. In the hospital, I was diagnosed with viral cardiomyopathy."

He left school for three months, rested, took medication, and his heart returned to normal. He went back to school and took his health for granted, just like any other teenager. He graduated in 1975 and was voted 'Outstanding Senior Guy.'

"I went to Miami University in Oxford, Ohio with expectations of normalcy," he said, "but things weren't normal. I was tired all the time, and they diagnosed cardiomyopathy again. I dropped out of college, stayed home and rested, and took new drugs — but my heart just kept enlarging."

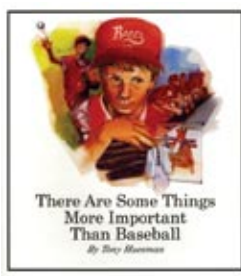
When he asked what the next step in treatment was, his doctors said there was nothing else they could do. They said he had three months to live.

"I was devastated. I had so many hopes and dreams, and now my doctors were saying I was going to die," he said.

On his own, he read about heart transplantation for cardiomyopathy. "Stanford University was the only place doing transplants at that time, so I flew out there and was evaluated. They accepted me into the program but told me, 'You'll probably die before you get a new heart.'"

Two weeks later, at the end of August 1978, he got the call that a heart had been found, so he returned to California for the surgery. The donor had died in a car accident. "When they took out my old heart, the doctors said it was in such bad shape they couldn't believe I was still alive."

He was only 20 years old, among the younger transplants, and the doctors told him his new heart would last five years, 10 at the most. After the surgery, he was bursting with energy, but because of his age, rejection was a big problem. "I spent seven months in Palo Alto before I came home," he said.



In the past 15 years, Tony has given away more than 100,000 of his books to elementary school students.

“When I returned to Dayton, I was kind of a celebrity and spoke about my experience all over the place. The interest was such that I could have been doing it somewhere every day. I really got excited about talking to kids and teaching them heart disease prevention. I wrote a book, and a friend illustrated it. I took it to some publishers, but they wanted to own it, and I’d have to buy copies from them to give away to students.”

Instead he found a friend in the printing business and started having fundraisers to pay for the printing. Called *Heart Smart*, the book is aimed at first graders and introduces them to healthy nutrition and exercise habits. In addition to the illustrated text, it contains illustrations of good and bad food, exercise possibilities and a word scramble.

Since that first book, Tony has written two more: *There Are Some Things More Important than Baseball*, introducing third and fourth graders to how the heart works, and *His Only Hope*, which introduces the idea of organ donation to fifth and sixth graders. In the past 15 years he’s given away more than 100,000 books.

Tony, who works as the marketing director for Tuffy Brooks Sporting Goods, has fun fundraising with a golf outing in the summer and Clocktoberfest in the fall. Sponsored by a local clock shop, Clocktoberfest is a fundraising takeoff on Oktoberfest.

Tony has since set up the Huesman Heart Foundation, whose mission is to provide healthy heart education programs in elementary schools. Besides giving away books during healthy heart programs, the foundation also sponsors Healthy Heart Days at schools throughout the Miami Valley.

“Healthy Heart Day is a full day of special programs, all dealing with heart-healthy lifestyles,” said Tony. “Medical professionals volunteer their time to teach the kids about diet, exercise and the dangers of tobacco. The Discover Health RV from the Cincinnati YMCA comes for the whole day. It’s like a classroom on wheels. The cafeteria provides a heart-healthy lunch, and the foundation provides heart-healthy snacks, like fresh fruit and sugar-free popsicles. At the end of the day we have an all-school assembly to recap the day’s activities. The foundation covers all the expenses. We had almost 5,000 kids at 11 schools participate last year.”

In addition to these full-day programs, Tony and his bear companion, Teddy Tenderheart, made healthy heart presentations to more than 2,500 elementary students. The foundation also sponsors the “Live like a Champion” program in the Dayton area. It’s facilitated by the Cincinnati YMCA.

Eleven years ago, about 10 years beyond the best-case scenario his doctors had given him, Tony’s transplanted heart was stolen. He married the pretty blonde thief, whose name is Carol.

Tony practices what he preaches by eating right and swimming or riding an exercise bike every day. Last year he was diagnosed with skin cancer and had to have surgery on his left leg; his biopsies since then have shown him to be cancer-free.

Last summer he was profiled in the *National Enquirer*, where he made a plea to find the family of his heart donor so he could say thank you. So far, he hasn’t heard from them.

“People say I’m a medical miracle, and I guess I am. I just feel blessed,” Tony said.

It’s true that none of us knows how long we’ll be here, but hopefully we all know what’s important to us. Tony has known what’s important to him for a long time. He wrote this poem shortly after his transplant almost 30 years ago:

It doesn't really matter when we die,
how we die or why we die.
What really does matter is how we live...
and the hearts and souls of those we touch along the way.



Left: Tony and Carol Huesman; right: Tony and Teddy Tenderheart at Healthy Heart Day