

Putting Her Heart into MHI

by Jon Caswell



“MHI has meant everything to me. Being a member is one of the most important things I have ever done.”

Donnette Smith can identify the day her life changed forever. It wasn't the day she had her aortic valve replaced 20 years ago — as a result of complications, that procedure involved three surgeries. It wasn't the day five years later when the same cardiologist replaced her aortic arch as well as the valve.

Those were big events, but “the biggest event that changed my life was becoming a grandmother,” Donnette said. “I thought my life was full until my precious grandchildren were born. I became a totally different person the day my grandson Ty came into the world. And my joy doubled the day my beautiful little red-headed granddaughter Hannah Grace arrived.”

Donnette, age 61 of Huntsville, Ala., joined MHI after that second surgery in 1993, even though she'd had a MHI visit following the first procedure. She'd vowed to join but never got around to it, until she was told that she needed a second surgery. “I immediately started looking for my local MHI chapter, but it had disbanded — a victim of individuals like me who failed to see the value of this kind of support and allowed the chapter to die. After my surgery I found out how to start a new chapter and, after many months of hard work, Huntsville, Ala. Chapter 260 was chartered in September 1994.”

She has held just about every office in her local chapter — president, vice president, treasurer, newsletter editor and program chair. She has been the RD and an ARD in the Southern region, and has served the past two years as national treasurer for MHI and is running unopposed for that position in the current election. “I have enjoyed each and every position I've held and would

Donette (r) with her daughter Dana (l) and granddaughter Hannah Grace



Tom and Donette Smith with their family pets



Donette's grandchildren Hannah Grace and Ty after a baseball game



do them all over again,” Donnette said. “I love working with volunteers because they are the lifeblood of this organization. They give of their time and energy because they love MHI, and that is exactly how I feel.”

As with many MHI members, Donnette appreciates the opportunity to give back: “I thought my life was over until the message of hope was delivered to me through an MHI visitor. I was drowning in fear, and this kind gentleman tossed me a life preserver. I’m still hanging on to it, and I pass it on to others I am fortunate enough to visit. It’s a good feeling.”

While visitors and grandchildren have made big differences in Donnette’s life, two other people have played pivotal roles. She told a touching story of her husband Tom’s devotion: “After my second surgery I was having trouble sleeping. One night the nurse encouraged me to walk for a while and told me Tom was in the waiting room and suggested that he might like to accompany me. I pushed my walker around the corner to the door of the waiting room, and there in the corner of the room was a makeshift tent with two sock feet sticking out. The ‘tent’ was a small table with a sheet thrown over it with a piece of paper on top with my name — placed there so the nurses would know who he was if I got sick during the night. I stood there looking at that special man sleeping on the hard floor just in case I needed him, and my heart overflowed with love for him and his commitment to me.”

Her 82-year-old mother Margaret Lovell is another special person in Donnette’s life. She raised six children, several by herself after Donnette’s father died of cancer when Donnette was 24. “Mother has finally retired, but she still volunteers at the nursing home, and she’s a member of Chapter 260 and has accompanied me to many conventions. We love to shop together, too. We have an annual shopping trip to Gatlinburg, Tennessee, the

weekend after Thanksgiving every year. It includes Mother, my sisters, nieces and my daughter. We have a blast!”

In addition to MHI, grandchildren and shopping, Donnette still works full-time as a technical writer at Redstone Arsenal in Huntsville, a job she’s had for more than 40 years. She’s also been a member of Celebration Choir at Whitesburg Baptist Church for 27 years. “I got my love of singing from my daddy and I have passed it down to my children. My daughter sings in the choir at her church. After Christmas last year our choir went to Israel where we gave concerts at churches and schools throughout the Holy Land. I really enjoyed that.”

Donnette is a good example of the old adage, you receive what you give. “MHI has meant everything to me. Being a member is one of the most important things I have ever done. Being able to give back is the theme of my existence. My reward has been to be able to give back what was given to me when I was facing surgery and felt my life was over. It gives me great satisfaction to be able to bring hope to someone else and let them know there is life after heart surgery. I appreciate each new day because I have been given another chance at life. Who could ask for a better reward than that?”

“I treasure the friendships I have made. I told Tom the other day how awesome it feels to look at a map of the United States and be able to count friends in almost every state. And it’s all because of my participation with MHI. What a blessing that is!”

And her commitment continues. “I see a bright future. There is still much to do and we have a fantastic group of leaders. I believe that MHI will become a premier organization, recognized for the professionalism and dedication of its incredibly talented staff and diverse membership. I have talked with many of our members and I hear the same intense interest I have in seeing this organization be the best it can be.” 🍷