

Cathy's Transplant Journey

William McTeigue

Personal Essay

Honorable Mention

Cathy had always been healthy. She was energetic and loved walking and exercising regularly. Her life changed dramatically when she suffered from her first episode of intense tachycardia. She was rushed to the hospital in an ambulance. Immediately, the doctors gave her sedatives, inserted an IV, and shocked her heart to prevent her tachycardia from developing into ventricular fibrillation. Cathy survived that episode, however, she was plagued with a new issue - an arrhythmia that brought unpredictable onsets. She recalls the immediate pain in her chest, and she felt discouragement from the longer term effects of no longer being able to walk up her favorite flight of stairs at church, which were a mere 24 steps that she used to climb with ease. Doctors prescribed Cathy medication to help regulate her heart rhythm, but five days later she experienced another episode of tachycardia and was flown to a hospital in Albuquerque. Her electrophysiologist then recommended an ablation procedure to prevent buildup of the electrical charge circulating in an area of her heart. Her hospital recovery took two weeks.

Even after the ablation, Cathy struggled to get enough oxygen, which caused her difficulty in everyday activities. One day as she was swimming, she thought, “Is it my age? My asthma?” Even her primary doctor couldn’t determine the reason for her difficulty. He said that it probably wasn’t her heart because she was already seeing two heart doctors. Yet on two occasions, Cathy nearly passed out and had to hold onto someone for support.

A few months after her second tachycardia episode, Cathy agreed to a catheterization, during which doctors discovered arrhythmogenic right ventricular dysplasia, which is a condition in which muscle is replaced by fat. Following the surgical procedure, Cathy received more shocking news. Her doctor suggested she join an organ donor waitlist. “At the sound of that advice,” she recalls, “I felt like I was being told I was going to die.”

Cathy had an internal defibrillator implanted and received stronger medication, yet her heart continued to degenerate. Three and a half years after her first episode of tachycardia, Cathy's doctor told her that if she did not get a transplant, she would live for at most a year and a half. She had congestive heart disease that made it difficult for her heart to pump blood. It was time for Cathy to choose a medical center to receive a heart evaluation. Her options were California, Colorado, and Illinois. Knowing that it would take months or years to receive a heart and additional time to recover, Cathy chose Cedars-Sinai in California so that she could live with her daughter in Los Angeles.

This life-changing decision came with some hesitation. Cathy's main concern was the emotional aspect of a heart transplant. The simple truth is that in order for Cathy to receive a heart, someone needed to donate theirs. In the case of a kidney transplant, only one kidney is required; in a liver transplant, only part of the liver is required; but for a heart transplant, the whole heart is required. In addition, Cathy had heard reports from friends about scary procedures and the stress of being on an organ donor waitlist.

After a week-long evaluation, she was accepted to Cedars-Sinai Hospital on the premise that she met the three requirements to join an organ donor waitlist. The three requirements are the organ must be irreparable, there must be no other disease, and the recipient must have strong social support for the recovery period. The process happened so quickly that she did not have time to pull back. Things moved fast, and within just one week, Cathy had a new heart. On a Tuesday, Cathy received more bad news. She had a biopsy that showed that her liver had become dysfunctional because of her heart. Cathy was put on the waitlist immediately. On Friday, Cathy met her daughter in Los Angeles. On Saturday, Cathy created an account on the CaringBridge Website that allowed her to document her health status to keep her family members updated. On

Monday evening, as Cathy was headed out to dinner with her family, she received a call about a possible heart, so she headed to the hospital instead for her transplant. By the next morning, Cathy had a new heart.

Within a week, Cathy had gone from joining the organ donor list to receiving a successful heart transplant. The whole process was quick, and Cathy was grateful for a new opportunity at life. Cathy was thankful that her family was supportive throughout the process; her daughter was her biggest cheerleader. Cathy learned to trust God through the process and reminded herself of the Scripture that says, “for God did not give us a spirit of fear.”

After Cathy received her new heart, she did not notice an immediate change. But after recovering for four months in California, she was strong. She never needed to take medication to suppress any pain. Furthermore, Cathy’s biopsy tests showed no rejection of her heart, although she will need to take medication for the rest of her life to prevent her immune system from rejecting her heart.

On October 12, 2013, Cathy drove herself home two hours from the Albuquerque airport. She recalls that day as the best day of her life. The Aspens looked more beautiful and the sunset more vibrant. When Cathy returned home, she finished her rehabilitation. Her friends were shocked by her progress and asked her, “Should you be that active?” Cathy found renewed strength with her new heart.

Cathy expresses how grateful she is. She is grateful to her doctor, who discovered her disease, her family who supported her along the way, and her donor, who was also from her home town of Los Alamos. Two years after her heart transplant, Cathy wrote a letter to her donor family. She never received a reply, though she is content knowing that her donor’s family is aware of the impact their daughter has made on Cathy’s life.

Cathy is now a strong advocate for education about organ donations. She was honored to serve as the president of the Organ Transplant Awareness Program of New Mexico. Cathy also competed at the 2018 Transplant Games of America and won eight gold medals in swimming events.

Cathy sees an opportunity to bring awareness of the importance of being a donor anywhere she goes. When she volunteers to register students to vote at the local high school, she also asks them if they are registered organ donors. When she walks into gyms or airports, she looks for Automated External Defibrillators (AEDs). If there are no AEDs present on any walls, she makes sure to bring awareness about the importance and the impact of having an AED available on site to save lives. In addition, Cathy contributes to her community through various organizations and takes every opportunity to promote organ transplant.

Cathy's story is an inspiration. Not all of them are as triumphant, however. My own maternal grandmother suffered from ongoing arrhythmias, and she died after a very strong episode from which she could not recover.

My grandmother, like Cathy, had been advised to have the ablation procedure. Her concerns about a financial hardship over the length of the recovery period kept her from deciding to take the small risk in having the procedure performed.

Initially, she would go to the hospital when her heart was tachycardic. Emergency room doctors would stop the electrical charge racing through her heart by restarting it. Her symptoms escalated with each episode until her heart could not handle the stress. My grandmother is part of the 25% of Americans who die from heart disease each year.

I am inspired to become a cardiac surgeon and help people like Cathy and my grandmother. I see the tremendous impact that transplants can have on someone's life. As I serve

my community as a cardiac surgeon, I will also educate others about the importance of organ donation so that they, too, can enjoy an abundant life.