

## My Heart Story

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October 5, 2024

I had Rheumatic Fever when I was 19, while in my sophomore year of nursing school. Even though I received oral antibiotics for strep throat, the bacteria were very resistant and the bacteria was detected in my blood. After hospitalization for the infection, I returned to my nursing classes and clinical rotations. For 60 days, I went to the student health clinic twice daily to receive IV antibiotics before and after I completed my clinical and classes for the day. Rheumatic Heart Disease wasn't diagnosed until two years later, in 1973, I was 21. I was still struggling with fatigue, shortness of breath and an irregular heart rate from having Rheumatic Fever. I saw a cardiologist who diagnosed me with Rheumatic Heart Disease and said my aortic and mitral valves were severely affected by vegetation that grew on them from the infection. He stated that I would need open heart surgery for valve replacements within a few years. He also said that Rheumatic Heart Disease was eradicated due to recent antibiotic therapy improvements and he hadn't seen a case previously so he called in a more senior heart specialist who confirmed the diagnosis.

Upon receiving this news, I placed myself on a program of being as healthy as I could possibility be. I watched my diet, exercised daily and maintained healthy lifestyles.

Rolling forward to November 23, 2000, I was 48, 27 years after being diagnosed with Rheumatic Heart Disease. I had climbed Mt. Elinor for the 21st time and I was having a hard time that day. I had significant shortness of breath and my heart rate was very irregular which I hadn't had in several years. I knew, from seeing my cardiologist earlier in the year and having a heart catheterization, that I would need open heart with valve replacement surgery in the next year or so. The next day after climbing the mountain, I was in my exercise class in the basement of Providence Saint Peter Hospital Fitness Center in the evening (the same place where we have Cardiac Rehab). I was struggling with shortness of breath and a fast heart rate. I wandered over to the bike where Dr. Bill Gavin was peddling away. I looked at him and said, "I'm in trouble" He had the resuscitation team there in minutes. I was rushed to the ER and to surgery after the fluid was removed from my lungs for Open Heart and Valve replacements. When I awoke

from surgery, I was so pleased that the tube in my throat was already removed and my hands weren't tied down. I remember feeling so grateful; like I had been given a new life. I had always felt that every day is a gift, but the feeling was so overwhelming that I wept. My family was at the hospital, all 30 of them. They came in pairs of two. I still recall how much I needed them and my friends for support. I also remember feeling their strength as it passed to me as they held my hands. The energy that I received from them was so powerful and healing.

After going home, I experienced ups and downs, especially with my blood thinner, Warfarin and a number of irregular heart rhythms, requiring adjustment. I loved Cardiac Rehab. My life started to become more stable at about 4 weeks after surgery. I went back to work after 5 weeks.

I had 12 years of cardiac stability after my surgery, then I went into a slow atrial fibrillation which I still have after six cardioversions and two ablations however with my oral heart medication and a pacemaker, which I have had since 2016, I feel great and grateful!