

Debbie's Story

Billie Jo Slade took care of everyone around her but neglected herself.

"Most people called her an angel," said her daughter, Debbie. "She was the person everybody loved." Working in schools with young children, "She was always the advocate for the underdog – kids in trouble would come to her," Debbie said. "That was her ministry in life."

Beginning in the 1980s, Billie Jo started suffering health problems, including breast cancer and osteoporosis. She was also a caregiver for other family members. "There was a day when taking care of yourself was looked at as selfish. She spread herself so thin. She was tired all the time. Her weight would fluctuate because she wouldn't eat right. It was a perfect storm of problems."

Ten years ago, doctors found calcium built up in the arteries around Billie Jo's heart. She had stents inserted, but soon after, fatigue returned.

"I was shocked," Debbie said. "With all her health issues, I never dreamed we'd lose her to heart disease. I didn't know that heart disease was the No. 1 killer of women. And my mom was surprised to learn that that's what was stealing her health from her."

Doctors inserted a pacemaker. "My mom was so petite that the pacemaker looked huge," Debbie said.

Before her mom died, Debbie had reached out to her father and a dear friend – encouraging them to get to the hospital in time when they suffered heart symptoms.

"I was able to save my dad from a heart attack. I was able to save my friend from a heart attack. But I feel like I lost a piece of my heart when I wasn't able to save my mom," Debbie said.

Billie Jo remained as active as possible until the end, making plans to go swimming at the YMCA and country western dancing with Debbie's dad the last week she was alive. She died of congestive heart failure at 74 in 2006.

Her death motivated Debbie to turn her life around.

"After watching my father, mother and friends battle heart disease, I'm determined to reduce my risk," Debbie said. "For the first time, I'm paying attention to the numbers my doctor gives me. I know my cholesterol and my blood pressure numbers. I know that my heart health is in my hands."

Debbie makes a point of doing something active every day but doesn't stop there. "I watch my nutrition. I know that food is truly fuel for my body and that what I do today leads to the quality of life I'm going to have when I have grandchildren. I don't call it a diet, it's a lifestyle. I'm also very careful to do things to feed my soul – whether it's reaching out to someone, prayer or meditation."

Debbie believes strongly in being informed. "Take your health and the health of the ones you love seriously and get information. Make sure to discuss health issues with your family and in your circle of friends. Ask, because someone in your circle is going through – or has been through – challenges. Empower yourself with all the information that's out there."



Debbie - Plano, TX

Age: 56

Age at time of mother's event: 54