

Gail's Story



Many women changed Gail's life. One gave Gail her heart. The others showed her that after her transplant, life could go on.

Eight years ago, "I was traveling at a pretty good clip along life's highway," said Gail, a wife, mother of four grown sons and successful business owner. She was also committed to living a heart-healthy lifestyle. "What happened to me could happen to any woman."

Gail got sick with what felt like never-ending bronchitis, pneumonia and "unbelievable fatigue." She went to the doctor three times. "Are you really slowing down?" she was asked. "Are you finishing your meds?"

But Gail never got better. She knew something was wrong. "Early on, no one really took a close look at my heart. Back then, not as many doctors were focused on women's heart health."

Gail's OB/GYN finally sent her to the cardiologist, who told her she had viral myocardopathy, a serious disease in which the heart muscle becomes inflamed and doesn't work as well as it should. "Anyone can get it. It's a little like strep throat, only it attacks your heart," Gail said. "By the time I was diagnosed, it had done significant damage."

Doctors implanted Gail with a biventricular pacemaker/defibrillator in 2000 and started her on drugs to reverse the damage done to her heart. But four years later, after complications, she went on the wait list to receive a heart transplant.

She was leery about the procedure; she needed to know she would be OK. "They would bring men in and say, 'well, this guy survived.' But I needed to meet someone who was like me so I could see that I could make it through and have a new kind of normal life back'."

She finally did. Gail met a young woman who was active and physically fit and had undergone a heart transplant. "She was pretty much the embodiment of what I needed to go forward." Gail's connections with women who made a difference didn't end there. A group of friends stepped in when Gail was waiting for her new heart.

"I call them my angels without wings. I had to live in the hospital for about four and a half months," she said. "My girlfriends would bring me dinner, tablecloths, candles and pictures of trips we'd taken together."

She also connected with Marcy – a woman she'd never met but whose heart she received. Marcy was an active, healthy mother of three who died in an accident at a family reunion. "She got up one day and thought she had the world by the tail. By the end of the day, her life was over, but she had made a commitment to donate her organs," Gail said. "I can never thank her and her family enough." She continually wrote to the donor family after her surgery to tell them how much she appreciated their gift of life. Gail received Marcy's heart on August 2, 2005. Gail calls it her new birth date. "It has been a long haul," she said. "Getting the heart is just one little part of it."

"I would never want a woman to go through a heart crisis without her own community of women. That's what the Go Red For Women movement represents," Gail said. "I hope that any woman who is diagnosed with heart disease knows exactly where she can go, call, log in or write to find the instant support of people who will become some of her new best friends."

Gail said that women in her shoes have a decision to make when they get their diagnosis: Embrace it or fold. "If you're a strong woman – and I think most women are – you say, 'I didn't want this, but it's here. What am I going to do now?' Then you really start moving forward."

Gail - Leawood, KS
Age: 55
Age at time of event: 47

