

# Patricia's Story



On a chilly winter morning nine years ago, Patricia caught her breath. She thought she had inhaled too much cold air. Two days later, at the gym, she felt a nagging, burning sensation in her chest. “It just seemed like I couldn’t do anything.”

That was unusual for Patricia, a busy employment manager who had never dealt with anything more serious than a sinus infection. It’s February in St. Louis – probably just the weather, she thought. Still, Patricia called her doctor, who suggested they meet in the ER. Tests revealed that her left coronary artery was 85 percent blocked. She had no family history of heart disease.

She had surgery a few days later. The next day, Patricia recalls, she felt fine but as she ate soup in her hospital bed, she became faint. The next thing she remembers is waking up two days later and finding out that she’d had a heart attack and then gone into cardiac arrest. “Medically, I was dead for one hour,” she said. “My doctor manually manipulated my heart to bring me back to life.”

The hospital staff called her a miracle patient. Patricia, who was 44, asked her doctor what made him continue. “He said I was too young to die, so he could not let me go. He just kept trying and trying.”

After 13 days in the hospital, going home wasn’t easy, even with her family’s support. Just walking around the house for two minutes was a strain. Patricia, a self-described “cheerleader for life,” hadn’t exactly been a couch potato. Before her hospital stay, she played golf, worked out and taught aerobics. And she was driven. After the surgery, she should feel better. So when was she going to?

The answer was about four months later. “I wasn’t just trying to get better physically, but mentally too. I was afraid to go out without my husband, Henry Lee – I needed him near me,” Patricia said. Patricia explored her feelings of fear and “why me?” with a psychologist. “I would hold my pulse just because I wanted to know that my heart was beating.” She began recovering physically and mentally and eventually returned to work.

Patricia’s favorite cousin, T.C., urged her to share her story with the American Heart Association. “You gotta stop being so secretive about it. Women need to know that yes, they can have a heart attack and survive and go back to what they were doing.” Patricia learned about the community of Go Red For Women. Sharing her story has helped her recovery.

“The movement shows women who have had a heart event that they are not alone – they have sisters and friends who want to be there for them. We’ve gone through it. We’re passionate about it,” she said. Heart disease kills more women than the next five causes of death combined, but it often goes undiagnosed. “Since I became a survivor, I know my numbers and the importance of listening to my body.”

Her cardiologist told Patricia that if she hadn’t paid attention to the small symptoms – the shortness of breath, the burning in her chest – she wouldn’t be here today. “Your body talks to you,” Patricia said. “When you notice something different, you need to tell your doctor.” She has also learned that her active lifestyle before improved her ability to recover.

Patricia’s scar makes some people feel sorry for her – but she doesn’t feel sorry for herself. She doesn’t want perfect, blemish-free skin. For her the scar is a poignant reminder of what she went through.

“To me it’s a lifeline. Since my heart attack, I want to live every day to the fullest, because I know it’s a day I will never see again.”



**Patricia - St. Charles, MO**

**Age: 53**

**Age at time of event: 44**