

## Yuki Kotani - Heart Health Activist



Yuki Kotani never expected that a heart transplant could heal her troubled relationship with her father.

“Eleven years ago, my father was diagnosed with cardiomyopathy, a virus that attacks his heart. That was all I knew growing up. I never got a chance to know him,” she recalls.

Yuki’s parents separated early and her father moved back to Japan. Feeling intense abandonment, Yuki internalized her sadness and anger. After years of hidden resentment, she had no idea how to handle it when, in 2007, her father told her that he was coming to New York, where Yuki was living, to wait for a heart transplant.

“Transplants and organ donations are very uncommon in Japan, so his only hope was to come back to America. In order for him to even make the flight over, he had to get an artificial heart,” she says.

Yuki knew the severity of her father’s heart disease. He had suffered 15 heart attacks over 11 years and was given a year to live when first diagnosed. Being the only family member nearby, she faced a difficult choice: put her feelings aside and help her father, or leave him to handle his transplant alone. Yuki chose to give him a second chance.

After his successful surgery and recovery, Yuki felt compelled to be honest with her father about the past.

“He had no idea I was in so much pain and that he had caused the core of my emotional issues. I had bottled up so much anger for so many years,” she says.

Yuki’s dad apologized to her for not being there and began to open up to her. He even described the poignant moment when he thought his life was over.

“In his mind, he described being in a big field of flowers and really being ready to die, but then his phone kept ringing and ringing. It jolted him back into the present, so he knew it wasn’t his time. After hearing that, I looked at it as a second chance to get to know him,” she remembers.

Together, Yuki and her father fixed their broken hearts and began making up for lost time. The new bond they created even changed the course of Yuki’s career. With her father’s encouragement, she transitioned from a stressful finance job to co-founder of her own nonprofit that provides affordable housing for heart transplant and cardiac patients in the Greater New York area.

Heart disease is Yuki’s passion now. She’s already coordinated 100 friends to do the local American Heart Association run and enjoys being a voice of hope and healing to other heart disease sufferers. And none of it could have happened without her father.

“It’s so interesting to look back now. I used to stress out over everything. My mental health was suffering. Now, so many doors have been opened. I have a family member who I can talk to. I’m not angry anymore,” Yuki smiles.

One thing Yuki wants women to know is how heart disease affects your whole body, not just your heart.

“Heart disease is the No. 1 killer of women. Not breast cancer, like most people think. Having a stroke is also a heart-related illness. A lot of women don’t realize that,” she states.

Yuki’s mission is clear. She’s in it for the long haul, and she does it for one very powerful reason: “I Go Red for my family because of love.”