

One Mother's Heart Story

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As a 33-year-old wife and mother of 3 small children, I had an out-of-hospital cardiac arrest after spontaneous coronary artery dissection of my left anterior descending coronary artery. My diagnosis is a rare condition that strikes young, healthy women in childbearing years, often with no family history or risk factors. My spontaneous coronary artery dissection happened after a day of skiing with my family. I received CPR from my husband in the kitchen of my babysitter's house. I was defibrillated by 3 police officers who were first on the scene and had an AED in the back of their police car. I was in the cardiac intensive care unit where I received several advanced therapies, including mechanical ventilatory support and therapeutic hypothermia, before moving onto the cardiac care floor for 8 more days, where doctors tried to figure out what the next best step was in my care. This is my story of the struggles and personal challenges that my family faced.

My husband, Nick, and I were in the process of building a house and were looking forward to an early March closing. Nick was traveling for his job. I was contracting as a speech therapist at the local high school a few days a week. I had 1 child in first grade, 1 in preschool, and my youngest had just turned 2 in January. The weekend before my event, I had been in Nevada playing ice hockey and hiking.

I don't remember much leading up to my arrest. I remember flying home from my trip to Nevada on Sunday morning. I have no memory of my husband leaving for a week of meetings in Philadelphia. I don't remember much of anything from the week before my event. I have no idea how I was feeling or what I did. I have pictures and videos of my oldest daughter cheerleading at a basketball game but have no memory of bringing her to practices all week or of the game itself. I have pictures of my 2 younger children at the Natural History Museum, but again, have no memory of being there. I don't remember anything about skiing the day I went into cardiac arrest. I don't remember when I was stricken with severe back pain or what that back pain felt like. I would have to imagine it was pretty significant, as Nick would never have agreed to go to the ER if I was not in severe pain. In the past, my back had acted up every once in a while, but in those instances, a trip to the ER never crossed my mind. I was complaining of numbness down my arms and into my hands. We dropped the kids off with an old neighbor who was already watching my youngest and headed to the ER. My first trip to the ER was pretty uneventful. The nurses and doctors did not do much but

take my family history, take my blood pressure and oxygen levels, and ask me where my pain was. I am sure I tried to minimize my symptoms. I would never have guessed in a million years that I was in the process of having a heart attack. Looking back, I would have hoped that the nurses and doctors would have questioned WHY I was having the symptoms I was having even if I, as an uninformed patient, was saying it was muscular and not something more serious. Heart disease is the number one killer of women, yet there was no mention of any sort of heart test to rule that out. I was young, I was fit, I had no family history and no risk factors associated with heart disease...yet 20 minutes after I was discharged from my first trip to the ER I went into full cardiac arrest in the driveway of my babysitter's house. My husband had to witness me losing consciousness. He watched me slump over and turn blue. He had to carry his wife and mother of his 3 young children into a house and give her CPR. He had to watch as the AED was attached to me. He had to hear those 2 scary words, "SHOCK ADVISED." He had to sit by my hospital bed for 4 long days without knowing what the future held.

During the early days in the hospital, while I was under therapeutic hypothermia, my husband Nick had to deal with lots of uncertainty. These days were the toughest for my family. Nick remembers it as a wait-and-see game. He really appreciated the doctors being upfront and honest with him and my parents. There were some important decisions he and my parents had to make like having another catheterization and getting an ICD. This was the most stressful on my family because of the different ways my family members approached the issue. Nick trusted the doctors as providers and as the experts. He felt that whatever the doctors decided was best for my case, he would trust their decisions. My mother, however, is one to research and weigh her options and make her own decision, regardless of what the doctors were saying. There was some disagreement because of this, but ultimately, Nick was the decision-maker. He really felt like the doctors were taking their time and doing their research. He felt that whatever decisions the doctors came to were well thought out and with my best interest in mind. I was at a well-respected hospital with a great reputation, which was important to my family. Nick felt comfortable and confident in the doctors' decisions.

I received an ICD 3 weeks after leaving the hospital. I think the ICD was a great decision. I feel I have so much less anxiety because I know that it is there and that it will save my life if I were to have another spontaneous coronary artery dissection.

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There have been a few times in the last 2 years where I have been worried. I might feel a little off, or my back might start acting up, and I get scared...but having the ICD helps lessen the anxiety and has probably stopped me from calling my doctor or going to the ER. I can't feel it, I can't see it, and I have the tiniest scar to show for it. I know that I was anxious presurgery but I think I was more scared of surgery, of being put under and of the actual placement, than of the fact that I was going to have an ICD. I think of it as my insurance policy. Especially because I have 3 young children and a husband that travels occasionally for work. I can't imagine my life without it.

After I was discharged from the hospital, life got back to normal. I would say I do have some neurological issues... memory, word retrieval, and organizational skills. I can't multitask like I used to be able to do and I tend to get overwhelmed much more easily. I think I have performed okay compensating for these things, but they do show themselves, especially now that I am getting back into the work force. I did get back out on the ski slopes. During a chairlift ride, I commented to my oldest daughter that I liked a particular trail and chairlift. I was telling her that I could not believe we had not skied that side of the mountain before. My daughter turned to me and said, "Mom, we skied over here the whole afternoon the day you had your cardiac arrest!"

Since my cardiac arrest, I have become an advocate of AEDs. Nick and I know how lucky I was to survive a cardiac arrest outside of the hospital...that I am one of the 5% who get a second chance at life. Had those police officers not had an AED in the back of their car, there is a good chance

I would not be writing this story. Since my cardiac arrest, I have raised money to put AEDs in all the on-duty police cars in my town. I am aware when I walk into a building where the AED is...and where they are not but should be. My first goal is to get AEDs anywhere and everywhere they should be. My second goal is to raise awareness. Cardiac arrest is more common than anyone thinks. More women die of cardiac arrest than of breast cancer. You are alive 1 minute and dead the next...except for a small percent of us who survive. I think it is important as a survivor to spread the awareness and make people understand that it is the number 1 killer of adults...even young adults...even healthy, fit adults with no family history or risk factors.

My children were so young when my event happened. My oldest, Brooke, has the best understanding, but even she does not grasp the severity of it. I am so grateful that my children did not witness Nick giving me CPR. I have told my children that their father helped save my life and that he gave me CPR. They know that my heart did something bad and that I had a heart attack. They have no idea how close they were to being motherless...that is really the only time I get emotional... when I think about all I would have missed out on over the past 2 years...and on how different their lives would have been without a mom.

Disclosures

None.

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