



Heart disease survivor profiles media backgrounder

Marlies Caswell

Marlies is a 58-year-old cardiac bypass recipient from Vancouver, B.C. Given her family history of heart disease, by the time she turned forty she started keeping a close watch on her cholesterol levels and going for an annual stress test.

Six years ago Marlies' cholesterol suddenly shot up, prompting her cardiologist to recommend an angiogram. Marlies's angiogram revealed symptoms that required triple bypass surgery, which she had at the age of 52.

"I guess I'm one of the lucky ones," Marlies admits. "I could have been like my mother; she suffered a heart attack while out shopping one day and died at the age of 61."

Marlies was one of a few bypass patients in B.C. to have her surgery performed on a beating heart, a progressive procedure that allowed her heart to continue beating during surgery without the aid of a heart and lung machine.

As a result, her recovery time was dramatically reduced and she went home three days after open heart surgery.

Within four months of her surgery, Marlies began volunteering as a peer counselor in the pre-op cardiac department at St. Paul's Hospital. She is also a member of the Healthy Heart program.

"It's important to put a human face on the disease," says Marlies. "I want other women to be aware that heart disease is the number one cause of death among women – listen to your body and don't dismiss any small warnings – early detection can save your life – if it can happen to me, it can happen to you."

Carrie Jung

Carrie is a 44 year-old heart disease survivor from Vancouver, B.C. Twelve years ago, Carrie developed a lingering cough that interrupted her sleep. A recreational distance runner, Carrie found she was also unable to continue running due to a constant shortness of breath. She was ultimately diagnosed with a diseased heart muscle, a condition that had claimed the life of her mother.

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“When I was first diagnosed with heart disease, I was really lost and trying to come to terms with what I was going through,” says Carrie. “I couldn't understand how it could happen to me. It just never occurred to me that I could have heart disease.”

After her diagnosis, Carries started a number of medications and underwent an assessment for a heart transplant. Within several weeks of taking the medication, her condition improved considerably and she was removed from the transplant list.

Over the next two years Carrie's health deteriorated drastically and eventually required a heart transplant in 2002.

Full recovery took nearly three years, but now Carrie has successfully returned to her employment and athletic pursuits. She is especially proud to have competed as a sprinter in the various Transplant Games, including two World Games (2005 and 2007) and one National Games (2006).

Carrie also does a great deal of volunteer work with the Canadian Transplant Society, the BC Transplant Society, and the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada. She says women need to pay attention to diagnosing heart disease early and maintain a healthy lifestyle.

“I became a spokesperson because I believe it is important to show people the face of heart disease, to show them the reality.”

Micheline Legault

Micheline is a 65 year-old heart attack survivor from Chelsea, Québec. She had a heart attack four years ago while skating alone on the Rideau Canal.

Micheline says that just before her heart attack began, she had difficulty breathing. Coincidentally, her husband called her on her cell phone at that exact moment. He insisted that she give her phone to a passer by, who immediately called the paramedics. Micheline soon lost consciousness and remained in that state for three days.

“I think the experience was almost harder on my husband,” says Micheline. “He stayed by my bed for three days as I lay there unconscious. He thought he had lost his best friend.”

Despite having a history of heart disease in her family, Micheline didn't think she was at risk for heart attack due to her active lifestyle and normal cholesterol levels.

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"Because I was so active, I didn't believe I could be affected by heart disease," says Micheline.

Prior to her heart attack, Micheline kept herself physically active by skating, skiing and snowshoeing regularly and also observed a healthy diet. Her cardiologist told her that her fitness level was what saved her life. Since her heart attack, Micheline says she has learned new ways to improve her diet.

"I'm definitely more careful with my diet after the heart attack," says Micheline. "I always check the labels when I go grocery shopping, I cook with olive oil instead of butter, eat smaller portions of meat and I don't eat things like cookies any more."