



Donnette Smith

Executive Vice President, Mended Hearts

I was born in Athens, Alabama, and moved to Huntsville, Alabama, after marrying my husband, Tom, in October 1980. I started my career in 1966 with the George C. Marshall Space Flight Center, National Aeronautics and Space Administration, where I worked under the leadership of Dr. Werner von Braun and was a member of his Saturn V Rocket Team. Later, I transferred to the U.S. Army Missile Command as a Technical Writer where I continued until retirement in 1999.

While I was working, I was diagnosed with heart disease. I discovered Mended Hearts, and began to think about bringing a chapter to Huntsville to provide others with access to the support that I had experienced. After my second heart surgery in 1994, I became the founding President of Mended Hearts Huntsville Chapter 260, and have served as Chapter VP, Treasurer and Visiting Chairperson. On the National level, I have been able to serve as Treasurer for two terms, and I am currently in my second term as Executive Vice President. To help spread the word and provide insight into the Mended Hearts experience, I've been the Mended Hearts representative for projects such as the I Heart Flu Shots campaign, the Hearts in Harmony campaign with Dr. Bob Arnot, and the Speak From The Heart program with Gilead Sciences, as well as being the "Patient's Voice" for several writing groups with the American College of Cardiology. Clearly I believe in the effectiveness of Mended Hearts! After having experienced the effectiveness of peer-to-peer support firsthand, I am proud to have been able to introduce that experience to others.



Fredonia Williams, Ed.D.

Southern Regional Director, Mended Hearts

Over the last eight years or so of my heart story, I have learned a lot about what my body can take. I had spent my life trying to stay healthy by exercising and watching my diet. My only medicine was a multi-vitamin. My heart story began in 2006 when I was diagnosed with bradycardia and had a pacemaker implanted. For the next year, I experienced a slow heart rate and irregular heart rhythm, but no additional symptoms except fatigue, which I attributed to my job as a high school principal.

In April 2008, my husband and I were traveling to Chicago when I experienced shortness of breath, heart palpitations and fatigue. After a right and left heart cath, I learned that surgery was needed immediately to repair a mitral valve for severe mitral regurgitation. Five days post op, I suffered cardiac arrest and was taken back to surgery for evacuation of a clot where I remained in intensive care for several weeks. The news that I had congestive heart failure came at my first post office visit when I was told that my heart was not pumping at capacity and had an ejection fraction of 11. The pacemaker that I had implanted needed replacing with an ICD. After getting the ICD, I was nervous about the possibility of getting a life-saving shock if my heart beat out of rhythm.

After many sessions of cardiac rehab, months of doctor conferences in three different hospitals, and six additional heart related surgeries, I finally have a green light to a normal life. I am now able to put heart disease to the side and focus on keeping my heart as healthy as possible.



Jill Bene

President, Mended Hearts San Diego Chapter 62

It was some 25 years ago when I learned I had a heart murmur. I had no symptoms, so I continued on with my life until 2001, when at a physical it was recommended I see a cardiologist. The diagnosis was aortic stenosis, with the warning that surgery would be required within 20 years. I was shocked, but then again I had no symptoms and again continued with my life.

I was in New Zealand in 2005 when I began to have shortness of breath. It was subtle, and I became apprehensive but continued with my vacation. Christmas came and went, and in January I came down with bronchitis, and this caused me tremendous shortness of breath. I found it hard to breathe lying down in bed so I would sit up most of the time. Of course, I checked with my doctor right away and it was decided that surgery was necessary as soon as possible. I felt so much fear! I had little experience with hospitals and surgery and asked my doctor if he could put me in touch with someone who had gone through the procedure.

Within 24 hours I had a mentor – a great young man who had both his aortic and mitral valves replaced and appeared to be doing really well. We had several telephone conversations and he was there for me, walking me through all that would happen at the hospital. This was invaluable and eased my mind considerably. Certainly I was apprehensive going into the hospital in February 2006, but I know I would have been in worse shape without my mentor's wonderful help.

My surgery went well, and a tissue valve was installed from a cow, but there was an electrical problem that caused me to have a pacemaker installed due to a slow heartbeat. I was quite upset at this prospect at first, but really it is not a lot of trouble managing the pacemaker. I receive a call the first week of every month on a specific date and time and I take out the equipment that was provided to me, hook it up to my corded phone and the technician checks to make sure the pacemaker is working. I also go to the hospital for a complete diagnostic every 8 months. So far all has gone very well.

I found Mended Hearts after a visit from a wonderful man who walked into my hospital room. I was touched that I had a visit from someone who did not know me. I attended my first Mended Hearts meeting in May of 2006 and became a member shortly thereafter.

The great people I have met in Mended Hearts and the stories we have shared is testament to why I have remained with this group. I have learned so much and I would always be available for anyone who knows they are going to face surgery but needs someone to talk with.

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