



Our Hearts. Our Stories.

Stories of Resilience from Women Living with Heart Disease

Transcript: Zybina's Story

Anyone who knows me can tell you just how active I am - living a very healthy lifestyle, exercising seven days a week, eating the healthiest foods, avoiding alcohol, and never having dessert in our home. My name is Zybina Richards, and this is my heart story.

My journey started on Christmas night, 2015. After dinner - Caribbean style, where a party is a party - my husband and I were dancing when I suddenly experienced severe chest pains and had to sit down. The same thing happened on New Year's Eve 2015.

The first six months of 2016 were filled with tests. Everything seemed fine until June when a CT scan revealed blockages in my arteries. I was told I would need stents, which I had placed in 2017.

I had always prided myself on being strong enough to handle any situation, but I was proven wrong. I was afraid - afraid to go to sleep for fear of not waking up, afraid to eat because I didn't want to develop more blockages. I became paranoid about every sensation in my body.

Thankfully, the Heart Institute reached out and offered an amazing selection of rehab programs. I attended physical rehab sessions, met with a social worker, and participated in stress management, medication management, and other sessions that were often insightful and even funny at times. The dietitian dismissed me after I shared my lifestyle choices. These programs helped me tremendously in my recovery, allowing me to get back to enjoying life. I thought that was the end of my heart issues.

I continued exercising twice daily and maintaining my healthy lifestyle. But fast forward to the summer of 2019 - I started experiencing chest pains and shortness of breath again. The shortness of breath lasted one minute, and the chest pains lasted two minutes before subsiding. After a series of heart tests, I was told everything appeared normal.

Three days after my tests, I still hadn't recovered from a reaction to the persantine test and ended up in the emergency room. I was hospitalized for 27 days at the Ottawa Heart Institute. After a series of mishaps and complications with all my arteries, I underwent a triple bypass.

During this time, I was also diagnosed with lung cancer. In February 2020, I had a lobectomy. Just one week later, I felt like an engine was revving up in my chest. I rushed to the emergency room, where I was diagnosed with supraventricular tachycardia. My heart rate spiked to 262, and I was taken into resuscitation and the ICU. I underwent an ablation, but months later, I attended just one rehab session at the Ottawa Heart Institute before I had to stop due to my declining health and another upcoming cancer surgery.

By 2020, I was panicking about not being able to access rehab, knowing how crucial it is in the healing process. But then, my rehab facilitator from 2017 reached out, and I was able to continue my physical rehab and counseling online. It felt just as effective as doing it in person, and it played a critical role in restoring my physical confidence.

I was also fortunate to be included in the Women@Heart peer support program. Sharing our stories and learning from each other gave us hope and helped us heal. Through the tools provided in this program, I learned to cope with both my emotional and mental health challenges. Even five years later, our group continues to meet regularly.

I cannot emphasize enough how much I appreciated having rehab after my surgery. Without rehab, my mental and physical state would have been compromised beyond repair. It is essential to know that rehab is available and accessible, with resources to support recovery long after treatment ends.

Today, my "new normal" allows me to remain active in my community, enjoy my two energetic grandchildren, and, of course, dance! I want to say—there is hope for all of us.