



## **Our Hearts. Our Stories.**

Stories of Resilience from Women Living with Heart Disease

### **Transcript: Jo-Anne's Story**

My name is Jo-Anne. I am 60 years young, a married mother of three, and a grandmother to two. I retired from the Canadian Armed Forces in 2017. My heart journey began in December 2023 while on vacation in Sweden with my husband. We were there to watch the World Junior Hockey Tournament.

After we arrived, we went sightseeing, visiting different museums. On the first day, I started experiencing chest pains, which slowed me down significantly. It was unusual, and I didn't know what was causing it, so I took it easy for the day. When we got back to the hotel, I borrowed a blood pressure monitor and checked my blood pressure, which was fine, so I didn't give it much more thought.

The second day, we were sightseeing outdoors, and because of the cold, I chose to wear a mask. I noticed that breathing through the mask lessened the chest pain, so I assumed that controlling my breathing was helping. Again, I walked slowly and struggled with some difficulty breathing. When we returned to the hotel, I checked my blood pressure, and it was still within the normal range. I assumed the discomfort was due to the cold air or the long flight, which had left me stiff and sore. I spent an hour stretching my upper back and neck, thinking this would help.

By the third morning, Christmas Eve, I had convinced myself that it was just the cold air and travel, and that I was fine. However, during breakfast, the chest pain started again. I excused myself, went back to the hotel room, and checked my blood pressure. This time, it was extremely high, and that's when I got scared. I was experiencing chest pains and high blood pressure while being alone. Shortly after, my husband arrived, and I explained that I really felt something was wrong.

We were in the process of checking out of the hotel to travel to our next destination, which was four hours away. We stopped at a pharmacy to get aspirin, and my husband took care of the luggage to prevent me from exerting myself. We arrived at our destination without incident, and once there, I called the National Health Line. The nurse strongly urged me to go to the hospital.

Fortunately, we were in a city with one of the largest teaching hospitals in Sweden. I knew I would receive good care, and they were fantastic. My husband and I went to the emergency room, where I was seen within 15 minutes. They performed blood work and an ECG (electrocardiogram), then had us wait. About 45 minutes later, they took me into a room, hooked me up to an ECG, and I waited for the doctor.

When the doctor arrived, he informed me that I had suffered a heart attack and that I would be admitted. He sent my husband home to rest and eat while I was transferred to the heart wing. I was given a bed, underwent tests, and then slept. The next morning, Christmas Day, my "gift" was an angiogram, which revealed that one of my arteries was blocked, requiring a stent.

Interestingly, they also discovered that another artery was completely blocked and had likely been so for years, but my body had managed to bypass it naturally. That issue would be addressed later if necessary. The stent resolved my immediate problem. I was fortunate—the doctor allowed me to leave on December 26th so

I wouldn't miss the first game, under the condition that I return the next day for a follow-up and to receive my prescriptions. We had two more weeks left on our trip, so I took it easy.

Upon returning to Canada, I was able to see a cardiologist quickly, which was good. However, I was still in disbelief that this had happened to me. I lived a healthy lifestyle—little alcohol, regular exercise, no smoking, good nutrition, and low stress. I knew heart disease ran in my family, but I thought I had escaped it by living healthier than my parents.

When I saw the cardiologist, I felt he was very dismissive. When I asked about a rehab program, nutritional classes, or any supportive programs for my heart disease journey, he told me those programs were for people who "really needed them". In other words, my heart attack wasn't bad enough to qualify for additional support.

While in Sweden, I had looked up information on heart disease and came across a peer support program for women with heart disease through the Ottawa Heart Institute. I decided to email them and sign up. In September 2024, I started with my group.

Through the program, I learned a lot and reached a point of acceptance that heart disease was now part of my new normal. I also felt far less alone, bonding with other women in the group as we shared our stories and struggles. With clear goals, I felt supported, heard, and better informed.

I still wasn't sure about my physical limitations. I was racing in the Dragon Boat Festival, pushing my cardio extensively, and wondered if I was overdoing it. At my next cardiologist appointment, I asked for a stress test, but I had to exaggerate my symptoms to convince him. I felt that having a stress test would give me a baseline of where I stood.

After completing the stress test, I met with the cardiologist again. Everything looked great, and he told me to come back in 18 months. When I asked if I had any limitations, he said, "No, go live your life."

So, that's what I'm doing—taking care of my physical and mental health, keeping in touch with my peer support group even after the seminars ended, and continuing to support and learn from each other. I am very grateful to have had the opportunity to participate in this group, learn more about heart health, and not feel alone on this journey.