

The lessons learned from tragedy, tennis and a life in plastic surgery

BY KENDRA Y. MIMS

Margo Stevenson Herron, MD, will never forget the last vacation she took with her parents and older sister in April 1992. Her family's spring break trip vacation to Sanibel, Fla., started off as a fun getaway – but the trip ended in tragedy when a motor scooter collision claimed the lives of her mother and 16-year-old sister during a recreational activity.

"My family chose to ride mopeds toward the end of our vacation, and we decided that I would ride with my dad because, at age 13, I was younger and less experienced, so my sister would ride with my mom," Dr. Herron recalls. "We were traveling back to our condo, and a van hit their scooter as they came around a corner. My dad and I were trailing behind them on our moped and were the first ones on the scene. My dad is an E.R. physician – and he performed mouth-to-mouth resuscitation and other life-saving techniques on my mom and sister while waiting for the paramedics. My mom was killed instantly, and my sister died shortly after in the hospital due to an intracranial injury."

In attempting to deal with the loss of her mom and sister, Dr. Herron found solace on the tennis court, playing the sport that bonded her family together. The sisters had spent countless hours practicing tennis with their father while growing up in Evansville, Ind. Their lives revolved around training and practice. Following in her sister's footsteps, Dr. Herron became a competitive tennis player at a young age, winning her first tennis tournament at age 6.

"Both of my parents were athletic and played tennis; they got my older sister into tennis first, so it was a natural progression for me to play as well," she says. "I started training when I was 4. My parents viewed tennis as an individual sport that required dedication, hard work and mental toughness, which they believed were qualities we could use later in life."

Dr. Herron admired her sister's athletic ability on the tennis court and watched her excel in the sport over the years. Sara Jane – a top 10, nationally ranked player – was her role model, and although the tragedy thwarted Dr. Herron's dream to compete with her sister in high school, she says Sara Jane's accomplishments and talents inspired her to keep moving forward.

"My sister was most likely headed to Duke on a full scholarship when she died," Dr. Herron tells *PSN*. "She was my inspiration to continue playing tennis because she was such a great player, and as my older sibling, I really looked up to her and everything she did. After that traumatic event happened in my father's and my life, I used tennis as an outlet while dealing with emotional trauma. While I loved tennis and the competitive nature of the game, being out on the court was my way of getting rid of my grief and regaining my power and strength. I felt I could accomplish anything."

The crossroad

Dr. Herron's family's favorite sport became her driving force. The mental toughness she developed during her tennis training helped her cope with her grief.

She went on to play tennis in high school and won the Indiana Singles State Championship in 1994-95 with a 28-0 record during her junior year at Reitz Memorial High School. Her tennis team also won four consecutive state championships. In her senior year at Reitz, Dr. Herron



Margo Herron, MD (right), and her late older sister, Sara Jane, honed their tennis skills from a young age. In 2014, the sisters were inducted into Reitz Memorial High School's Hall of Fame, which Margo's father attended (inset).

received the school's annual Mental Health Attitude award, which honors one senior who displayed mental toughness, overcame adversity and showed poise on the court.

Due to her hard work on and off the tennis court, Dr. Herron received a full athletic scholarship to Southern Methodist University, where she went on to play both singles and doubles and ultimately became the team's captain.

Despite her awards and success as a tennis player, while in college Dr. Herron questioned the longevity of her tennis career. She developed an interest in plastic surgery at SMU, but found it difficult to keep up with the demands of both tennis and medicine. Not ready to quit playing tennis entirely, Dr. Herron gave up her scholarship at SMU and enrolled in the University of Evansville on a full athletic scholarship, where she was able to pursue medicine and play tennis in a less-competitive environment.

"I always had an interest in medicine," she says. "My father brought home different information on repairing cleft lips and palates. He encouraged the medical field when I was young. He saw that I'd make a great surgeon because I had very good eye-hand coordination, which translated into tennis."

"I realized I couldn't have the longstanding career I wanted in tennis," she continues. "It's a great sport that taught me a lot about life and how to deal with grief and disappointment, but I felt a drive and need to pursue medicine. I felt a better path in life for me was plastic surgery, so I chose medicine."

The perfect match

Dr. Herron quickly discovered many parallels between the sport and the surgical specialty when she opened her practice after residency. She credits her ability to stay calm under pressure and her flexible and resilient attitude to her experience on the tennis court. She says she still uses the skills she learned in tennis

when performing plastic surgery procedures.

Those skills were put to the test early-on as she faced a daunting surgical procedure without the support system many other fledgling plastic surgeons might enjoy.

"There are people in plastic surgery practices or academic practices who have partners or another attending to talk to about their first case, but I was on my own," Dr. Herron says. Finally on her own as a practice plastic surgeon, she tapped into her hard-earned experiences in tennis – and she channeled her tennis coach – to get through her first breast reconstruction case.

"As a surgeon, you are the captain of the ship, which is similar to playing singles and being the captain on the court," she says. "You have to be strong and ready to deal with everything when you have your own practice. That includes figuring out what you're going to do when things don't go the way you envisioned."

"Similarly, when you're a competitive tennis player, it's just you on the court, facing your opponent," Dr. Herron adds. "You've been taught the skills to win the match, to figure out your opponent's weakness and to deal with pressure – and those skills translate into plastic surgery. I always had to remain calm and in charge while playing tennis. That was my approach to plastic surgery, as well."

Dr. Herron attributes her success in both areas to hard work and discipline.

"I love that your talent or skill level didn't have to be better than your opponent in tennis, but you could still work really hard and figure out a way to win," she says. "That was my specialty, and my dad and coach recognized that about me. I wasn't necessarily more technically skilled than my opponent, but I would figure out a way to beat them."

"The same tactic applies to my plastic surgery career," she adds. "I wasn't always the smartest person in my class, but I could out-work people and achieve my goals, which was to become a plastic surgeon."

Strategizing, mental toughness, working well under pressure and figuring out my component's weakness worked in my favor in my tennis career and plastic surgery career."

Never forgotten

Dr. Herron and her sister were inducted into the Reitz Memorial High School's Hall of Fame in 2014 and the Indiana High School Tennis Coaches Association Hall of Fame in 2016. She's proud of her sister's achievements and found ways to honor her mother and sister during major milestones in her life. Dr. Herron named her daughter, Eve Sara Jane, after her sister, and she named her practice Elizabeth Institute to pay homage to her mom, Mary Elizabeth.

"My mom was a philanthropist in the community that my husband and I grew up in, and she was really active in all of my sister's and my school events – including the PTA and sports," she says. "When my husband and I decided to move to Oregon, we were trying to figure out a name for our practice. We felt Elizabeth Institute would be a great way to remember her and what she did for the community we grew up in. I feel it's really important to be a philanthropist and help out your community. The name creates a special place for my mom, and having her be a part of my practice was really important to me."

Today, Dr. Herron participates in ultramarathons during her spare time. Although she only plays tennis occasionally, the family tradition continues with her 4-year-old daughter and 7-year-old son who recently started training. Dr. Herron says she appreciates the role tennis played in her life, and adds that she's grateful for the guidance of her father, Peter Stevenson, MD, and his willingness to help her continue playing tennis after their traumatic loss.

"My dad, who still practices emergency medicine part-time in Evansville, has been a huge inspiration for me to continue on," she says. "Tennis was certainly a big part of who I am, but my dad has definitely influenced who I am. He was the only one around when my mom and sister passed away, so he had to be a mother and a father. He raised me and kept me in line. He shaped me into the person I am today, so I definitely have a lot of gratitude and love for my dad."

Helping others

Dr. Herron is passionate about using her surgical skills to help patients overcome their struggles and get through difficult times in their lives. She notes the majority of her practice is breast surgery, and adds that she finds it rewarding to perform breast reconstruction.

"I have patients come in for their tissue expansion, and they'll tell me 'I have all these doctors ... I'm getting chemotherapy, radiation, and I lost my breast, but you're developing a breast for me,'" she says. "My office is the only light in their day, and they're happy to see me. It feels amazing to be the one responsible to help them, whether it's skin cancer or a mother who wants to get a breast augmentation or abdominoplasty to make her feel more comfortable in her own skin."

"My friends who are not in medicine ask me, 'How do you do what you do?'" she continues. "It seems so challenging, but I feel really lucky to do what I do. Losing my mom and sister was a traumatic event that shaped my life and made me want to do something that was powerful and strong. Now I come to work every day and help people feel good again. I'm doing what I love." ■