



# Survivor

## Stories

THE CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION REPORTS THAT EVERY YEAR, ABOUT HALF A MILLION AMERICANS HAVE THEIR FIRST HEART ATTACK. AFTER THE SHOCK WEARS OFF, MANY SAY THE GRATITUDE FLOODS IN. HERE, PATIENTS SHARE THEIR EXPERIENCE OF WHAT IT'S LIKE TO HAVE A HEART ATTACK, AND WHAT THEY'VE LEARNED FROM THE ORDEAL.

BY Temma Ehrenfeld

### ***Too Young to Be Sick*** **Molly Schroeder**

**Marketing Manager, Age: 28**  
**Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin**

On a sunny September afternoon, then-college senior Molly Schroeder went for a long run before her team's soccer practice at St. Norbert College, near Green Bay, Wisconsin, and then returned to her apartment. "I was in the best shape of my life, eating healthy and exercising all the time," she notes.

Suddenly, "It felt like someone was squeezing my heart, stabbing at the same time. I was nauseated, sweating. There was a bizarre feeling in my arm, like a ring around my wrist," she says. Schroeder thought she must be having a panic attack, but on the phone, her father advised her to go to the hospital.

When an ER nurse said she was having a heart attack, Schroeder argued: "I'm 21 years old, that's not what's going on," she recalls saying.

As it turned out, she had a 90 percent blockage of her left coronary circumflex artery. Just six weeks earlier, Schroeder's mother had died from a pulmonary embolism after complications of surgery. When she was 12, Schroeder had been diagnosed with a small hole in her heart, but her doctors couldn't find it two years later and told her family it had healed. After suffering the heart attack, one theory the doctors had was that a clot had migrated from the hole in her heart into her artery.

Today, Schroeder lives near Lake Michigan in Wisconsin and works at

a winery. She takes medication to control her cholesterol and thin her blood to lower the risk of another attack. She became a pescatarian, eating fish, dairy and eggs, but no meat. She also works out every other day, either running, walking, hiking or kayaking—but her days of playing soccer and other contact sports are over. "If I do have another clot, it could travel anywhere," she says.

Schroeder used to try to attend three social events on a day, but has learned to set priorities. "I could get into a car accident tomorrow," she says. "I feel God left me here for a reason." Her experience has inspired her sister to lose weight and her brother to feel "more grateful for life," she adds. And while her condition remains "a medical mystery," a new cardiologist has begun testing her for a variety of possible concerns, with the hope of keeping her heart (and the rest of her) fully functional.

**Lesson learned:** "There's always a happy moment you can ride with."

## About 14 percent of heart attack victims die.





Molly Schroeder suffered a heart attack in her 20s.

## Giving Thanks

Debora Grandison

Writer, Age: 58

St. Louis

When Debora Grandison went into early labor with her second child at 29, she received a labor-stopping drug. While laughing with her 2-year-old in a hospital room, she suddenly felt dizzy and nurses came rushing in. “How long have you had a heart murmur?” one of the nurses asked.

Actually, she didn’t have a heart murmur. Grandison’s heart trouble would be misdiagnosed for the next 25 years as mitral valve prolapse, a leaky heart valve.

It turned out she also had gestational diabetes. Her blood sugar stabilized after her son was born, but when it spiked again years later, she was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes and received regular insulin injections.

Along the way she worked as a substitute teacher and took care of two foster children in addition to her own son and daughter. After her husband was transferred to a new job in St. Louis, she switched doctors. Grandison’s new endocrinologist suggested medication instead of insulin shots. But several times Grandison rushed to the ER fearing a heart attack, with shortness of breath,

palpitations and pain in her left arm. She ended up on 13 medications.

Her mother suspected a thyroid issue, since she had one herself, and took Grandison to see her own doctor. That was when she learned she had Grave’s disease, which raises the risk of cardiovascular problems.

It was also around this time that diabetes-related heart disease struck her relatives. Within four years, she lost her brother and uncle to heart attacks, and her father to a stroke.

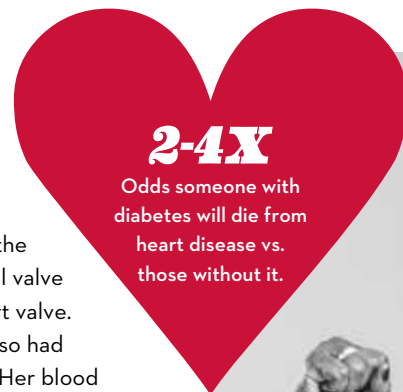
Grandison, a Sunday churchgoer, began writing and became inspired to fight harder for her health. “I heard God,” she said. And she felt her experience had a purpose. She enrolled herself in a cardiac rehab program and researched insulin pumps, receiving one in 2006.

But in 2008, Grandison still felt short of breath and exhausted. It turned out she didn’t have a mitral valve prolapse after all, but rather cardiomyopathy, a disease of the heart

muscle that makes it hard to pump blood throughout the body. At 48, her doctors recommended that she get a pacemaker. “My grandmother was in her 70s and she had a pacemaker,” she recalls. “I thought, ‘What are they talking about?’”

In 2009, she received a pacemaker and “it completely changed my life,” she says. “I had my energy back.” Now she walks every day or uses a treadmill at home in bad weather. Because of her diabetes pump and pacemaker, she can’t go through a scanner in the airport and has to get a pat-down, but travel is worth it: She recently went to Aruba and New Orleans. Everywhere she goes, she likes to tell people about the connection between diabetes and heart disease. “I believe I would be remiss if I didn’t share,” she says. “It has been absolutely crazy, but I’m still whole. It was a journey of not knowing.”

**Lesson learned: “Everything that has happened, there’s a purpose.”**



**2-4X**

Odds someone with diabetes will die from heart disease vs. those without it.



Debora Grandison says her faith keeps her strong.



Sofia Montoya was born with a heart defect.

## Growing Pains

Sofia Montoya

Student, Age: 20

Boulder, Colorado

About 40,000 children are born with a heart defect each year in the U.S., and for many it goes undiagnosed for years. That was not the case for Sofia Montoya, a marketing student at the University of Colorado, Boulder. At 5 months old, she had open heart surgery to correct a hole in her heart, which lies on the right side of her body. At the age of 2, she had surgery on her right hand, which does not have a thumb.

Montoya’s different hand didn’t faze her. In kindergarten, she began tying her older brother’s shoes for him and tying everyone else’s shoes at school. She writes with her left hand. At the age of 7, she had a pacemaker installed because the scar from her first surgery was slowing down her heart rate. After the surgery, “It felt like a ton of bricks were on my chest and it was hard to breathe and stand up straight,” she recalled. But in two weeks she was back in school.

Montoya didn’t let her heart condition slow her down. She played soccer, but wore a heart guard (a hard plastic shell) for protection and had a “relatively normal” childhood, she says.

Montoya stays active today, walking

everywhere she can and taking weekly dance classes. Still naturally slim, she loves pasta and her homemade lemon dessert cups but she makes an effort to avoid junk food.

But another challenge for Montoya may lie ahead. She dreams of having three children. And every six months, she still sees her cardiologist, who monitors the battery in her pacemaker as it will need to be replaced. “A wireless pacemaker would be awesome so I wouldn’t have to get surgeries,” she says. “I’ve always lived with shortness of breath, but it’s something I could manage.”

**Lesson learned: “I’ve always learned how to adapt.”**

## Embracing the Future

Mark Johnson

Writer, Age: 62

Scottsdale, Arizona

Mark Johnson and his husband, Tom Samp, were traveling from Chicago to Scottsdale, Arizona, to begin their life as early retirees. The couple planned to celebrate turning 60 together in St. Louis, Johnson’s hometown. On that hot and humid morning, they braved a short walk. Johnson felt

weak, with an odd discomfort radiating down from his left shoulder, and “a sense of doom.” As they drove back to their hotel, they passed a hospital emergency room, and Johnson told Samp, “You better pull in.”

Johnson had a significant blockage on the left side of his heart and the next morning, he received two stents. Luckily, his heart attack was considered mild, and three days later, the pair set off for Scottsdale.

Johnson’s father and aunt had both had heart attacks in midlife, and he had been taking a daily baby aspirin for years. Still, the experience felt “surreal.” In his new life in a warm climate, he had a fresh start. And he had about 20 pounds to lose.

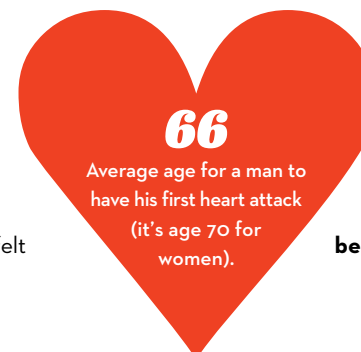
Over 12 weeks, Johnson attended a cardiac rehabilitation program in Scottsdale, gave up ice cream, cut back on red meat and lost his taste for salt. Today he swims and regularly hits the gym, including time on a treadmill,



Mark Johnson found new energy.

stationary bike or elliptical routine and light weight-lifting. He also takes a gentle yoga class twice a week and joined the Phoenix Metropolitan Men’s Chorus where he found a new community. “I have a lot of energy now,” he says. “I feel as good as I did on my 40th birthday.”

**Lesson learned: “Listen to your body. Be vigilant about your diet and remember that any form of exercise is better than none.”**



**66**

Average age for a man to have his first heart attack (it’s age 70 for women).