

Listen to your **HEART**

Five women open up about the lessons of living with heart disease.

by **LESLIE GOLDMAN**

Photography by **JOHN DOLAN**

“Don’t ignore your risk factors”

Erin O’Connell Peiffer, 51
Eldersburg, MD

In 2001, halfway through a water aerobics class with my sister, I started coughing and couldn’t stop. I thought I was having an asthma attack, so I drove myself to the ER. The doctors thought a virus was attacking my heart and causing fluid to build up in my lungs and sent me home with medication.

At my follow-up visit two weeks later, I wasn’t any better, so the doctor sent me to the hospital for a cardiac catheterization (a procedure in which doctors take a close look at your heart and arteries). When I woke up, I immediately knew something was wrong. The room was filled with people—including my husband, who was in tears.

The doctor told me my left main artery was severely



Erin, a Heart Truth advocate and WomenHeart Champion, walks daily with her dog, Ally.

HAIR & MAKEUP BY SUSAN HEYDT FOR THE ARTIST AGENCY

blocked, and I needed bypass surgery right then and there. I was stunned: I'd been diagnosed with very high cholesterol (in the 300s) right after college, but since I was young and at a healthy weight, my doctor just kept an eye on me. It wasn't until after the surgery that I realized if I had educated myself about high cholesterol and heart disease, I would have insisted on more tests and handled the situation more aggressively. As doctors wheeled me into the operating room, I kissed my husband goodbye and sobbed—I thought it might be the last time I saw him.

I am grateful the surgery saved my life, but I had to find a new normal. Extreme fatigue prevents me from working, but I try to walk 2½ miles and take an hour daily for “me” time: reading and listening to music. I lost the 35 pounds that I'd gained, and have regular checkups.

I also found out that I have a gene defect that causes my sky-high cholesterol—and when my sons were 6 and 9 years old (they're now 18 and 20), they tested positive for the defect. They are taking statins and we've all followed a lowfat, low-salt diet ever since. In a way, my heart failure saved their lives, too.

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People ask, “Aren't you angry that your original doctor didn't do more?” But back then, doctors weren't so clued in to women and heart disease. Physicians are more educated now, but it's still up to you to know your risk factors and how to protect your heart—at every age.



In honor of her work as a *Heart Truth* advocate, Joyce visited the White House in 2004.

“Know the symptoms of a heart attack”

Joyce Cullen, 63, Kansas City, MO

I have a weird feeling,” I told my husband when I woke up with a burning pain between my shoulder blades and an odd tingling sensation in my right finger. After tossing and turning for a bit, I got up, put some clothes in a bag and asked my husband to drive me to the hospital.

When the ER doctors first examined me, they said I was probably having a gallbladder attack. Tests seemed to confirm that my heart was OK, but I was unconvinced and insisted that doctors keep me overnight for observation.

Two hours after I settled into my room, the sensations returned. I thought back to the day before, when I heard that First Lady Laura Bush was visiting Kansas City on behalf of *The Heart Truth* campaign. She'd been in town to give a speech about the unique heart attack symptoms that often happen to women: fatigue, pain or discomfort in your shoulder blades and/or arms. That's when it clicked. I pushed the nurse's button—I was having a heart attack!

More tests revealed that two of my arteries were almost completely blocked.

I was rushed into surgery and within five hours, doctors had inserted two stents, small mesh tubes that help restore blood flow to your heart. I was 55—the same age as my father and brother when they had their heart attacks. Coincidentally, I had been at my internist's office the day before, complaining of unusual fatigue. But since my blood pressure and cholesterol were normal, the doctor didn't do any further screenings.

In the eight years since my heart attack, I've revamped my not-so-healthy Southern diet (I've learned to love grilled chicken breasts, fresh fruit and frozen yogurt!). And I exercise every day, either by walking one or two miles or logging 30 minutes on the elliptical trainer.

But here's the change I'm most proud of: Thankful for how Mrs. Bush's speech helped me, I became an advocate for *The Heart Truth*, and I speak at local churches and community centers to share my story. If I can help just one woman recognize the symptoms of a heart attack so she gets to the emergency room faster, I've made a difference.

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“Slow down”

Amy Nartatez Heinl, 43
Pittsburgh

June 2, 2010, started like any other day. I woke up at 5:30 A.M. to work out in my basement before heading to my 50-hour-a-week job at a bank. Ten minutes into lifting weights, I felt searing chest pains. Thinking I had pulled a muscle, I put the weights down and walked outside to stretch. As I came back inside, I headed toward the couch to lie down, but I collapsed on my kitchen floor.

Next thing I knew, I was being rushed into surgery. I woke up in the recovery room with my doctor standing over my bed. “Amy, the bad news is, you have experienced a rare and potentially fatal heart condition called spontaneous coronary artery dissection (SCAD) in which your artery lining tears and causes bleeding. The good news is, you’re alive and you are going to be OK! You can do this!” he said, referring to the rehabilitation that was ahead.

But I felt alone and scared. I was a healthy woman: I exercised, ate right, didn’t smoke and had no family history of heart problems. How could this happen to me? I didn’t think I could “do this.” But slowly, I did do it. Three months after surgery, I ran my first 5K.

Through it all, something the doctor said stuck with me: He had asked if I’d been feeling tired lately



Amy with her three boys (from left): Michael, 15, Devin, 12, and Austin 17.

and I thought, *What woman isn’t tired?* I’d been stretched way too thin. Now I work flexible hours and make sure I’m home to have a healthy dinner with my family, and I practice yoga to take care of my mental health. My life depends on it.



Amy, an AHA Go Red For Women volunteer, proves that you can live an active life after heart disease.

Extra help for your heart

These survivors have made it their mission to raise awareness of heart disease in women and are active with the following organizations.

♥ **Go Red For Women** The American Heart Association’s GRFW movement offers heart health information and resources, as well as advice for women by age group. Goredforwomen.org

♥ **The Heart Truth** Educate women in your own community about heart disease with the help of this campaign from the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute. Hearttruth.gov

♥ **WomenHeart** The National Coalition for Women with Heart Disease provides free support services to women living with heart disease and information on heart-healthy living. Womenheart.org

“Trust your instincts”

Regan Judd, 23, Lexington, KY

When I felt like a giant brick was on my chest at dance team practice during my junior year at the University of Kentucky, a little voice in the back of my head whispered, *Could something be seriously wrong?* But I was only 19. Heart disease was something that happened to older people.

After practice, the symptoms worsened. I called my parents, who begged me to go to the emergency room. Instead, I tried to sleep it off. When my father called the following morning, he threatened to drive two hours to school and take me to the ER himself. So I finally went.

The doctor who examined me referred me to a cardiologist, and

what I thought would be a quick check the next day turned into a yearlong ordeal: I needed surgery to repair a congenital heart defect—a leaky valve that was enlarging my heart.

To focus on my recovery, I took the semester off. Back at school, I eased into a regular schedule, but became tired easily. Volunteering with the American Heart Association and the support I found in other survivors is what helped me persevere—I eventually rejoined the dance team and finished college in four years.



Regan is an AHA Go Red For Women volunteer and has lobbied for heart-disease research funding.

Three years after surgery, I'm back to my old self but regret that I ignored my gut (and my dad!) and didn't see a doctor ASAP. Your intuition is powerful—listen to it.



Lidia, an AHA Go Red For Women volunteer, with two of her children, Tiphany, 17, and Matthew, 11.

“Push for a second—or third—opinion”

Lidia Morales, 39, Los Angeles

control pill was causing my symptoms. I stopped taking the pill right away, but the chest pain persisted. The cardiologist still chalked it up to stress, but I knew something else was going on.

I set out to find a new doctor and chose a female cardiologist—I felt like a woman would take my symptoms seriously. After just two more tests, the doctor called me into her office and gave me the terrifying news: I needed open-heart surgery immediately. I had a condition that caused one of my arteries to collapse, which compromised blood flow to my heart. She might as well have said my life was over. I just sat there bawling, imagining my three young

children growing up without a mother.

Less than two weeks later, I had surgery to repair my artery. The recovery transformed my outlook on life: The pain from the surgery made even the smallest everyday activities, like opening the refrigerator door, difficult to do on my own. Now, I'm so thankful to be able to exercise, let alone brush my teeth and drive—all without being in pain.

The main lesson I learned is to be your own advocate. Sometimes you need to push a little further—ask that extra question, get another opinion—to find the answers you need. ♦

I had been having palpitations and prickly chest pains for a few months, but between work and taking care of my three children, I kept putting off going to the doctor. Then, in February 2007, a high school

friend died from a massive heart attack. I thought, *If it can happen to him, it can happen to me.* One week later, I saw my doctor. He referred me to a cardiologist, who, after doing a series of tests, told me that my birth