



Rita's Story

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Rita – Southern Maine

As a long time supporter of the American Heart Association, I could never have imagined how much heart disease would impact my own life. I lost both of my parents less than a year apart — my father from artery blockages and my mother from aortic dilatation and dissection, diagnosed only at the end of her life. Several of my siblings have also suffered cardiac events, including aortic dissection similar to our mother's.

Then my own life was impacted on August 17, 2005. On a normal workday, I complained to colleagues of vague symptoms, but nothing that indicated a heart problem. Within moments, I suffered full cardiac arrest due to a spontaneous dissection of the left anterior descending artery (LAD). By the time help reached me, I had no heartbeat or pulse and had already turned gray. Before that day, I had been in perfect health with great cholesterol numbers, had never smoked or drank, ate a healthy diet and exercised regularly.

I was blessed to have been at work at that moment with people around me. We had an AED (Automatic External Defibrillator) and First Responder Team in our office, who shocked my heart several times. I was also blessed with the quick response of local EMTs and ready access to Maine Medical Center's cutting edge cardiac treatment. This included a brand new hypothermia “chilling protocol,” which helped prevent brain damage, since my heartbeat was restored, yet I remained unconscious for no known reason. Without all of these people and technologies lined up in my favor on this one day, I would not be alive.

I have since learned that spontaneous LAD dissections are unrelated to one's lifestyle. They are extremely rare and most often diagnosed after death. They cannot be detected with a screening test and they tend to occur in middle-aged women, even ones with no apparent risk factors. In fact, only about 75% of all cardiac fatalities are caused by known risk factors — that leaves a great many more that are unpredictable or unpreventable. So, I am all the more fortunate to have lived and reached a full recovery without brain damage. Cases like mine and so many others only emphasize the urgent need to continue heart and stroke related research.