



April Fools' Day Miracle

by Melinda



Most people think of April 1st as April Fools' Day, a day of jokes, pranks and laughter. For me, it's a day a miracle happened. At about 5:00 P.M., as I walked up the steps by Gwinn Commons at Seattle Pacific University (SPU) campus in Seattle, I collapsed in sudden cardiac arrest. And thanks to the foresight of my university, the capable hands

of two security officers, and an AED (automated external defibrillator), I live to tell the story.

I don't recall anything about the rest of that day, but others filled me in on the details. It was a day of coincidences. My art history class got out early, or there wouldn't have been so many people around when I collapsed. The right people happened to be nearby. A fellow student retrieved her sister, a nursing student, from the campus library. The nursing student and others gave me CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation). Two of my guy friends who saw what was happening called campus security, kept people away and also helped with CPR.

When security officers arrived, they had an AED in hand. The officers shocked my heart two times before it started beating again. If they had not had an AED, I probably wouldn't be here today. The firemen arrived quickly, but perhaps not quickly enough for a heart in sudden cardiac arrest.

I was lucky. My university had set up an AED program. AEDs were installed in the gym and health center, and with security—to be prepared if needed.

And it was needed, for me. I knew I had a heart condition. As a child I was diagnosed with asymmetric septal hypertrophy, a hereditary condition passed on to me from my father's side of the family. It causes a thickening of the wall in the

heart. On medications since 16, I had regular exams and didn't have symptoms. My checkup six months earlier went fine. I didn't worry about things too much—I pretty much felt invincible.

Until April 1, 2003, when my heart stopped beating. My friends watched as I was loaded into the ambulance for transport to Harborview Medical Center. My parents came up from our hometown of Salem, Oregon to begin the anxious wait with my friends, wondering if I would recover completely.

My first memory after losing consciousness was April 5th. When I woke up I was very confused about where I was and why. My parents were in the room with Dad's boss and his wife. All of us wondered what triggered the arrest. When my hospital roommate coded that night, it was frightening to say the least.

Later that week in x-ray, I had to stand up and be off oxygen for a short time. I grew dizzy and warm, almost collapsing. After this incident, an AED went with me everywhere.

April 10th, nine days after my sudden cardiac arrest, I underwent surgery to have an implantable defibrillator inserted in my body. An ambulance took me to the University of Washington Medical Center, where I met Dr. Richard Page, a heart rhythm specialist. He and the nurses explained that a small metal box about the size of a bar of hotel soap would be placed inside me, over my heart. This implantable defibrillator could shock my heart back to a normal rhythm if it beat too fast, or back to beating if my heart should stop. Because I am so young, a surgical specialist was onboard to help make the implant as unnoticeable as possible.

After my discharge from the hospital on April 11th, my mother and I stayed in an on-campus apartment for the weekend, so I could adjust. I also had certain limitations: for the next month I could not lift my

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arm higher than a 90 degree angle or lift anything over 10 pounds. Basic tasks such as washing my hair and getting dressed were a challenge. It may not seem like a big deal after sudden cardiac arrest, but I had to cut my hair to make it easier to care for—so much for my plans to grow it longer.

April 14th found me back in class. Everyone was shocked. They all thought I was done for the year. But I'm stubborn and I had no intention of quitting. I wanted to continue with my 17 credits, but my parents and doctors overrode that, so I dropped down to 12 credits. I finished out the year with decent grades and had the opportunity to do many fun things with my friends.

There are a few restrictions that go along with having an implantable defibrillator. No caffeine, medicine every morning, no roller coasters, and staying away from large speakers at concerts and security machines at airports. (But who doesn't love getting patted down? That's a story in itself!)

I wear a medic alert bracelet that reminds me daily of what happened. I will be forever grateful to all the people who helped me. They saved my life that day and helped God work a miracle. Now I want to share with others how thankful I am for that miracle and the difference it's made in my life.

Note: AEDs are prescription devices. AED users should be trained in CPR and use of the AED. Although not everyone can be saved from sudden cardiac arrest, studies show that survival rates can be dramatically improved with early defibrillation.

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