

Heart Warriors

Local heart disease survivors share their stories

It's one thing to read the statistics about heart disease, and it's another to hear about how it's changed someone's life. To keep spreading the word about this #1 killer of women, we spotlight local survivors. Their stories of struggle and triumph send the powerful message that heart disease can happen to anyone. Even you.



Katie Bracken

Hypoplastic Left Heart Syndrome, Age 7, Whitwell, TN

Tonya Bracken found out her daughter, Katie, had heart disease when Katie was still in the womb. "Something was wrong on my ultrasound," she says. "I went to a cardiologist and she was diagnosed with hypoplastic left heart syndrome."

Tonya was in disbelief. "I had done everything right. We had a healthy son. We went straight into planning."

Katie was born in 2006. She had her first open heart surgery when she was just 2 days old. Since then, she's had two more surgeries—the second at 5 months, and the third at 3 years.

She is now in second grade. Just about to turn 8, she has had nine heart cath—an invasive imaging procedure that involves passing a thin flexible tube into the heart. "You couldn't tell," Tonya says. "She always has a smile on her face. She does ballet and tap. She calls her scar her 'heart zipper.'"



Veta Rebecca Harris

Congenital Heart Disease, Age 15 months, Chattanooga, TN

There was no reason to believe Veta Harris would *not* be a typical, healthy baby. She was born right on her due date. It had even been an easy pregnancy for her mother, Mysti.

Then Mysti and her husband Ben got the news. Veta had serious heart defects and would need to be air lifted to Vanderbilt immediately.

At just 6 days old, the little girl was given a heart cath. The doctors came back with great news: Veta was a candidate for surgical repair.

Veta underwent her first open heart surgery at just 13 days old. She had a second surgery last July.

Today, she is almost 15 months old and thriving. The Harris family is now waiting to find out if she will need a third (and hopefully, final) open heart surgery when she is 3 years old.



Lauren Penney

Congenital Heart Disease, Age 17, Hixson, TN

When Lauren Penney was 11 years old, she passed out mid-air on a trampoline at gymnastics. Little did the Penneys know then that Lauren had experienced a cardiac event.

Nine months later, Lauren passed out again at tumbling practice. This time, doctors ran heart tests and found abnormalities. A whirlwind of screenings ensued. After experiencing more cardiac episodes, Lauren was implanted with an IRL heart monitoring device.

The Penneys consulted with doctors far and wide. Finally, Lauren was diagnosed with multiple PVCs (irregular heart beat preventing blood flow), POTS syndrome (drastic changes in blood pressure), and PFO (a hole in the heart that didn't close at birth).

Where is she now? Lauren's ILR was removed in December 2013, and she continues to take one aspirin a day to keep her blood thin. This year marks her final year at Hixson High School, where she cheerleads and holds a 4.0 GPA.



Sonya Perry

Left Ventricle Cardiomyopathy, Age 51, Hixson, TN

Sonya Perry says she was in the best shape of her life when heart disease hit. Then one morning she woke up unable to breathe. "I had been having a cough for several days and I thought I had pneumonia," she says.

At the hospital, Sonya learned her hacking had been a sign of heart failure. The very next day, she was airlifted to Vanderbilt. There, she was diagnosed with idiopathic left ventricle cardiomyopathy—an unknown virus had destroyed the whole left side of her heart. Sonya had a defibrillator implanted and was put on several medications. "They told me then that if I hadn't woken myself up, my husband would have found me dead," she says.

Today, Sonya works full time at two different jobs and has a full life. With her defibrillator and medications, she is still able to exercise. "I believe that God answers prayer," she says. "When it was happening, I made a promise to God that I would witness and telling my story is one of the ways that I do."



The American Heart Association is dedicated to building healthy lives, free of cardiovascular disease and stroke, through education, caregiver support, research, and development of health care professionals. Go Red for Women is a social initiative designed to empower women to take charge of their heart health by equipping them with the knowledge necessary to lead healthy lives with healthy hearts. ♥