

INSPIRING HOPE

Christine Ballengee Morris - *"Each sunrise reminds me of my grandson".*

January 2009 marked the beginning of a journey that continues to challenge and change me. It all began with Oprah. The opening week's theme was take charge of one's life. Dr. Oz, a cardiologist from New York City, was featured for the health segment. He said we know our body the best and often doctors dismiss our knowledge and we let them. He suggested obtaining a health buddy to go to appointments and be an advocate.



I had been suffering *high blood pressure for over a decade* with no relief. My overall health was also compromised—unexplained fevers, swollen lymph nodes, and always tired. I was born with a congenital heart disease called **coarctation of the aorta**. It was not corrected until I was twenty years old with an open-heart procedure--the narrowed section of my aorta was removed and replaced with a *Dacron* tube.

At that time, I thought it was fixed. I did not know or really think that the coarctation could be related to my situation now. I asked my husband, David, to be my advocate and we began our journey up and down the medical brick road.

After I communicated my frustrations and fears, my physician finally sent me to a cardiologist. The cardiologist did more blood work, EKG, Cardio MRI, and Ultrasound. He found my aorta had re-coarctated at both ends of the original repair piece, and two valves were problematic. The plan was to fix the aorta and observe the valves. The decision was to apply for a research project sponsored by John Hopkins Hospital. They applied, but I did not meet research protocol. So the surgeon applied for compassionate use. Meanwhile more tests - a heart scan and brain scan. I was notified the brain scan revealed **two brain aneurysms**. Permission was finally given to use the stents. Once they were in place, they used a balloon to expand them (and ultimately the original Dacron tube--straightened and enlarged the connection areas top and bottom). I had a couple of months to recover before the first brain surgery.

Due to complications after the first brain surgery, a **stroke**, my memory of the next few weeks was lost. But two months into therapy, my headaches had not stopped and I went to see my neurosurgeon. He told me the second aneurysm doubled in size and the next surgery was scheduled in two weeks. No stroke this time so I was able to go home sooner. Therapy continued and I relearned how to swallow, talk, walk, read, write, and drive with help from many therapists.

So why tell this story? **Healing takes a long time** and includes one's family and friends. Without them, healing would have been impossible. I learned that a partnership with my medical caregivers is critical. Most of all, I learned to love life—what a cliché', but it is true—**each sunrise reminds me of my grandson** who use to say, "Look it is a beautiful day." He is right; every day is a beautiful day!

If you've had a similar experience, or would just like to talk to Christine about living with heart disease, her contact information is listed below!

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It is great to be alive – and to help others