

INSPIRING HOPE

Christopher Clark- *"My life is not over yet, it has only just begun"*

I grew up a healthy child. From the age of five I began playing sports year round. I was athletic, playing soccer, baseball, basketball, skiing, and golf, to name a few. Soccer was my sport of choice and I played all over the world. After playing travel and high school soccer, I played at the collegiate level at a division one soccer program. At that point in my life, I felt great and had no health problems. But, in retrospect, when I had my college physical; the doctor checked my abdomen and noticed I had a very strong and noticeable heart beat. He was concerned and wanted to rule out an abdominal aortic aneurysm and needed an ultrasound. A week later I had my ultrasound and my descending aorta was perfect, therefore, I was cleared to continue playing soccer. My ascending aorta and aortic arch went unchecked.



After graduating with a B.S. in Biology, I decided to go to dental school at The Ohio State University. This is where I met my wife and where my life changed forever. We now have two beautiful girls and we own a dental practice in New Albany, Ohio. After graduation, my wife and I completed a general practice residency at The Ohio State University. Part of our residency was to visit patients at the Ross Heart and James Cancer Hospitals to make sure those patients were dentally cleared for surgery. Little did I know that ten years later I would be in the same situation and

my wife would be clearing me for my own surgery.

Once I began working full-time in my own dental office I began to feel overly tired. I thought it was only stress, but I decided to see my family physician. She listened to my lungs and heart and said everything sounded great. She did some blood tests and those results came back normal. I even completed a sleep study to rule out sleep apnea and that test was fine too. I still was running about 2-4 miles every other day with no symptoms, but I was much slower and felt out of shape.

Over time, my symptoms seemed to get rapidly worse. My wife and I had the stress of a new business and also had found out we were blessed to be expecting a second child. I began having headaches every day for three months. I knew I was pre-hypertensive and thought the headaches were caused by all of the stress and my blood pressure. I went to see my physician again and was placed on a low dose beta-blocker to help with the blood pressure and headaches. After taking the medication for a couple of months I felt better. A few months went by, and I was feeling great, I didn't think it would be a big deal to skip my medication for a few days. So, I did. I started having palpitations and did not feel good at all, which I attributed to not taking the medication. When I got back on the beta-blocker the palpitations were still there and I started feeling light headed. My blood pressure skyrocketed. I could not get my BP under control and was advised to go to the ER.

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It is great to be alive – and to help others

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In the emergency room they did a chest x-ray, EKG, blood work, and listened to my heart. Their tests were inconclusive and they suggested I follow up with a cardiologist. When I met with the cardiologist, he could not find any cause for my symptoms and suggested we do an echocardiogram in 6 months. I explained to him that I truly felt something was wrong and I would prefer to complete the echocardiogram that day. It was a good thing that I insisted on the echo, because two days later I got a call that would forever change my life.

On February 21, 2013 my cardiologist personally called me at home to discuss the results from the echocardiogram. He informed me that I had a congenital heart defect, a bicuspid aortic valve, which was failing and causing severe regurgitation. This bicuspid valve had also caused a 4.5cm ascending aortic root aneurysm and left ventricular dilation. I felt like he was reading someone else's results. How could he be talking about me? I was 34 years old! I had just started living the life I had worked so hard for! We had a baby on the way! I was active, maybe a little out of shape, but not what I would picture someone with cardiac issues to be. The cardiologist was also shocked. He said it was amazing that nobody could hear the severe regurgitation of my aortic valve. So, on top of the stress of starting a new dental practice and a new baby girl on the way, I now had something more to think about. That was staying alive for my family! I had so much to live for!

Over the next few weeks, I had so many tests done; chest x-rays, EKG's, transesophageal echo's, multiple transthoracic echo's, MRI's, CT scans, blood work, and a heart catheterization done to make sure there were no blockages of my coronary arteries. I spent a lot of time considering where I would have my surgery. I live in Columbus, but I had met with an amazing surgeon, Dr Lars Svensson, who had pioneered the particular surgery that I needed to have. After much research, time and prayer, we decided that I needed to trust this man with my life.

We scheduled my surgery for November 7, 2013. My wife and I had our beautiful baby girl that July. After her maternity leave, my wife was back to work and now it was my turn for surgery. My condition from February to the time of surgery had gotten worse. My ejection fraction went from 65% to 55%. My left ventricle was severely dilated. The aneurysm was still 4.5cm, but the aortic valve was severely regurgitating. My surgery at the Cleveland Clinic went better than expected. I had a key-hole operation which means I did not have a full sternotomy and there was less pain and bleeding. Dr. Svensson was able to save my aortic valve by doing a procedure called valve sparing and he did an aortoplasty to return my aorta to normal size. I know with the valve sparing procedure I will eventually need to have my aortic valve replaced in 15 to 30 years, but at least it buys me some time to not be on blood thinners. By the time I need to have my valve surgery again I will at least have the option of a mechanical or tissue valve.

I am very thankful for the continuing research and new techniques in heart surgery. There have been many lives saved due to the continuing advancements. I am also thankful for my family and friends who supported me. Without them, this would have been very tough. If there is one thing I could say, it is that my life is not over yet, it has only just begun. I have a new lease on life and I am one of the lucky ones to still be alive. Listen to what your body is telling you, it could save your life. Since my surgery 3 months ago, I am back to working, exercising, and living life to the fullest. All my symptoms and ailments have gone away which I think were signs of my aneurysm and failing valve. Joining Mended Hearts is something I wanted to do to give support back to those who need it.

If you've had a similar experience, or would just like to talk to Chris about living with heart

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disease, his contact information is listed below!

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