

# The Gift of Life

## Sweet Rewards for Heidi Ash

by Sheryl Jensen

**H**eidi Ash received the ultimate gift that one person can give another, the gift of life. She received a heart from a donor whose name she does not know, giving her a second lease on life that few with her congenital heart problems ever survive to have. All this has also given her the perspective that life is a celebration and that she has an enormous amount to be thankful for as she starts a whole new venture.

"I am a professional patient. I earned the title. My body is a virtual road map from head to ankles. From the first surgery on, most of my life has been focused on surviving," she says. Heidi describes, with a remarkable sense of humor, her endless medical procedures, needles, IVs, doctor visits, hospital stays, strokes, eight heart surgeries, and a successful heart transplant almost nine years ago.

### Miracle Baby

"I was a full-term baby and at first pronounced normal. All that changed within a few hours. I became cyanotic and so blue, I was almost black. The doctors and nurses at St. Luke's and my parents did not expect me to survive," says Heidi.

The closest cardiac hospital operating on infants at the time was the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. "My parents, plus a head nurse from St. Luke's hospital, took me in an incubator to the University Hospital. My first open heart surgery was at five days old. I survived to the surprise and delight of the doctors." She was the first baby so young to sur-



vive this type of surgery at the University Hospital.

With her in and out of the hospital as a baby and a toddler, her family had many scary moments when it looked like she was not going to make it. She required a second open heart surgery when she was three years old.

"I had quite a few procedures when I was a baby and a young child. So with all my scars, it has ruined my chances as a swimsuit fashion model," she says with a chuckle.

### Living in Limbo

Countless trips to the University for

Albert and Sylvia Zaslasky, Heidi's parents, on their 40th anniversary-March, 1992.



more surgeries and other medical procedures consumed much of Heidi's childhood and teenage years. Missing huge blocks of time at school, she was tutored at home or in school at the hospital.

"My childhood was a life lived in limbo. The hospital to me was easily a second home.

My brother Paul was five and my sister Judy was seven when I was born. I am sure nothing could prepare them for having their worlds torn asunder."

Her father Albert had to work two jobs and was going to college at night to get his degree to pursue a career in social work. Keeping a job with the best health insurance possible was, of course, a critical imperative. Her mother Sylvia had to go with her, sometimes for weeks at a time, to Minneapolis for medical care.

Heidi recalls, "My parents did their best to give me some normalcy in my childhood. I wanted to play at recess or with the kids on the block instead of just watching them. I was smaller than my classmates and often sick because of my heart condition."

When she was seven, she had a brain abscess that required surgery. "This surgery was different because they shaved my head. I got a blonde wig and a brown wig, but neither was made for a child's head."

That same year she developed acute endocarditis, an infection of the lining of the interior of the heart, requiring a lengthy hospital stay, followed by another open heart surgery. Ages eleven and fourteen brought two more open heart surgeries and more missed school.

Heidi describes her high school years as challenging, but thankfully free of any major medical events. After graduation, she went on to UMD to pursue a degree in communications and psychology. More emergencies and yet another open heart surgery interrupted her studies

again, making it a long, uphill process for her to finally earn her degree.

### **Moving On and Falling Back**

Heidi met her husband-to-be Steve Ash at a party for a mutual friend. After they were married, Steve got a job as a news photographer in Las Vegas. They moved there for five and a half years but decided to move back to Duluth. Steve got a job with WDSE, and Heidi worked at the whole Food Coop until the all-too-familiar feeling of needing to go to the cardiologist again happened in the spring of 1996.

Another open heart surgery for a valve replacement still did not keep things on an even keel for her medically. She recalls, "My complexion was a dusky blue color. I was usually quite cold, and it was becoming more difficult to catch my breath."

### **Life Changing News**

"If I were to pick a day that changed the course of my life, it would have to be June 21, 1999," Heidi remembers. Her cardiologist told her that she was in heart failure and had run out of surgical options. It was time to go to the Mayo Clinic and meet with a Cardiac Transplant doctor for an initial appointment.

"Was it devastating or positive news? I was overwhelmed to say the least. It was true, my heart was really failing me, and there was no miracle procedure that was

going to help me except for a transplant," she says.

After a seemingly endless battery of tests at the Mayo Clinic to determine if she was an acceptable candidate, all that was left was to see if she would be put on the list. On August 12, the letter arrived saying that she was a candidate for transplantation.

"Holding the letter in my cold, blue hand made it real. The words typed on the paper were potentially good news for me. I was well aware, however, that the only way for me to receive a heart was for another person to die. This weighed heavily on my mind. I also knew, however, that it was a gift another person was giving by choice." She received a pager that would let her know when a heart was available.

At the same time, however, Heidi had been accepted into the Counseling Psychology graduate program at UMD. "I coped by continuing to go to school and focusing on my future. It was important to have a goal, something else to focus on," she relates.

On March 8, 2000, the pager finally went off, and her transplant coordinator gave her the monumental news that they had a heart for her. On March 9, after all the years of struggle to keep her own failing heart beating, she received the transplant.

The transplant was more difficult due to the past surgeries. Heidi was unconscious for twelve days and also had some complications requiring additional surgery. A lengthy recovery period in the Transplant House in Rochester followed until she received the devastating news that her father had died. She was allowed to go home for the funeral and then went back to Rochester for nearly another month. "He never saw me after the transplant since he was not healthy enough to travel to Rochester but he was so proud."

The emotional roller coaster of all this would seem insurmountable for most, but Heidi carried on with her typical spunkiness, sense of humor, and tenacious will to live.

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She notes how honored she feels to have had such talented doctors, nurses, and support people throughout her life. They, her donor, and her family and friends have brought her to where she is today and where she hopes to go in the future. Heidi continues to have medical follow-up checks at Mayo, but her improved health has opened some new doors in her life.

### Following Her Heart

Heidi has decided to follow her passion, a love of beauty and chocolate, to create her own line of hand-made gourmet chocolates. "Yes, I earned my master's in counseling psychology, but now I make people happy with chocolate," she says. With the opening of her business this past April, 185ChocolatLLC, named after the number of her heart transplant at the Mayo Clinic, she has started to make her dream come true.

"I love the look of satisfaction on people's faces when they are eating the chocolates that I have made. And besides, studies say that chocolate is good for you!"

She also is donating a portion of the profits from her chocolate sales to the Charity Transplant Fund to help transplant recipients, those waiting, and their care givers at Mayo with their non-medical expenses.

Encouraging others to contemplate being organ donors is



Heidi celebrating post-transplant first three months with one of her favorite transplant cardiologists, Dr. Brooks Edwards.

also important to her. She has spoken to grade schools, colleges, and other groups about her transplant experience. "Being a living donor is truly an altruistic act. You are a Good Samaritan. People need to get this on their drivers' licenses and to tell family and friends of their decision. It is an amazing gift to give someone. It is the gift of life."

For information on how to become an organ donor, go to the *Woman Today* website at [www.thewomantoday.com](http://www.thewomantoday.com).

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