

## **Rebuilding my Broken Heart: An open letter to Dr. Tirone David**

**Written by Rebekah Hughes**

Dear Dr. David,

A few years ago, I was told I wouldn't see my 40<sup>th</sup> birthday.

In 1979, you commenced your career in Toronto as a cardiovascular surgeon.

That same year I was admitted to The Hospital for Sick Children and diagnosed with an undifferentiated sarcoma--a rare and rapidly growing tumour in children. I was a thirty pound, three foot, not quite three year old, with a tumour the size of a grapefruit.

Treatment for paediatric cancer was in the pioneering stages in the late seventies. The doctors treated me very aggressively hoping I would respond to treatment. After surgery and high-dose radiation therapy, I underwent chemotherapy every three weeks for two years.

While the cancer was cured, radiation-induced damage would leave me permanently scarred, including surviving with only one functioning lung. The doctors predicted that I would be unable to have children, warned about recurring cancer; such as the pre-cancerous cells that developed in my thyroid in my early twenties. Yet, they were unclear of the damage that would occur to my heart.

My adolescence and early adulthood were a constant struggle. After I married and my husband, Jon, and I desired to raise a family, I was blessed to be able to conceive, bear and naturally birth three children. However, unknown changes happening to my heart, made caring for my growing children increasingly difficult. As my heart slowly weakened, so did my ability to breathe.

In 2012, Dr. Eric Yu diagnosed me with severe aortic stenosis. Due to the narrowing of my aortic valve, blood could not flow properly from my heart into the aorta and onward to the rest of my body. Two years later, after regularly and carefully watching my heart, Dr. Yu advised me to stop all strenuous activity; he told me my heart could no longer handle it. He doubted anyone could do anything further for me, but agreed to discuss my case with his colleagues

Reality was grim; the end seemingly near, but I never lost hope. I believed, with all my heart, trusting that God, who formed my heart and ultimately holds it in His hands, would fulfill His purpose for all of my days.

Then a providential phone call from your office would ultimately give me another option. You were determined that you could help.

I was not going to be an easy patient, even for one of the most talented, brilliant, creative and innovative heart surgeons in the world. But I went online and read about the *David Procedure*—the heart procedure named after you. I felt very privileged and humbled to be in your care.

You were certain you could replace my aortic valve and if you did—I would live—but, if you didn't—I would have --- at the most --- two years longer to live. You reminded me there would be significant risks because of my 30% lung capacity and there would be a hard recovery.

I asked you: "If I was your daughter, what would you do; would you go ahead with such a risky surgery?"

"Yes," you submitted, you would.

Jon and I agreed we would proceed with this high-risk surgery and I confessed to you of the countless people not only praying for me, but also for you. By the end of my extended stay in cardiovascular ICU at Toronto General, Dr. David, you could only turn your hands up towards heaven and say that you believed that Providence had a hand in my life.

In August 2014, at 37 years old and in class III heart failure, I climbed onto the operating table. My eyes scanned the sterile room and your expert medical team—all focused on the task before them. The bright lights, gleaming equipment, machines and dedicated staff crowded the room. The sombre atmosphere in the room mingled with their hopeful, confident and optimistic attitudes.

Jon described how solemn you were when you finished in the operating room. You hushed my sister who cheered when you reported that I came through the surgery because you were not sure if I would make it through the night or the next 24 hours. Jon was with me for the whole roller-coaster ride of those 80 days in CVICU while we fought for my life and then anticipated going home to our family, which turned out to be harder than I ever could have imagined.

You explained to us that when you broke apart my sternum you could not have anticipated how dreadful my heart really was—buried under clay-like tissue and altogether in the wrong position. You answered my endless questions that I scrawled on scrap paper because I had no voice and you drew diagrams, on the old clipboard I somehow acquired, of how you carved out eggshell shattered parts of my heart and replaced it with healthier arteries.

My arteries were so terribly calcified from radiation treatment thirty-five years ago that my heart could have and would stop at any time within the coming year had we not gone ahead with surgery.

I wonder what you thought when you stood for over six hours to replace my aortic valve, repair my arteries and rebuild my damaged heart only to see me turn blue at the end of it all when I was lifted off the operating table. Or when my only functioning lung collapsed and developed pneumonia, and I went into respiratory failure, needed to be re-intubated (insertion of a breathing tube into the trachea), then endured a tracheotomy for a month and I could not smell, eat, or talk, and finally my phrenic nerve (which originates in the neck and passes down between the lung and heart) and diaphragm proved to be damaged. This may seem like every day routine to you, but what a privilege you have to make such a profound impact on so many lives in this world. I am grateful your father pushed you to pursue what has become your passion.

Dr. David, you have had made an extraordinary difference in my life. You and I have shed tears together over the good things God has done in my life, despite how difficult my life has been from a medical perspective, and how God has blessed me with a husband who has loved me so well in sickness and in health, and three miraculous children. I thank God for you and will never forget you.

You will be thrilled to know that I will be celebrating my 40<sup>th</sup> birthday later this year.

I could write so much more, but you have hearts to operate on, so I don't dare take any more of your time. The only thing I miss about 80 days in CVICU is the compassionate and inspiring people we met and grew to love!

You are one of them.

Sincerely,

Your heart patient, Rebekah