

Special Ladies in Red

Jonnie Guerra by Laurie Kessler

Jonnie Guerra lived a busy life typical of many Americans. An employee of the U.S. Postal Service for more than 30 years, she took on an even greater role at work when the post office “downsized” in the early ‘90s, cutting back on the number of workers they employed and giving those they retained even more to do with less time and resources. Needless to say, this caused quite a bit of stress. Working long hours was tough, but when her mom had a stroke several years later, Guerra would take on the added task of care-taking. “I can’t believe I did it,” she mused. “I was working 10- and 12-hour shifts and then coming home to take care of my mother.” When Guerra’s mom died in 2004, she was left with a depressed and ailing father. In fact, he was so heartbroken over the loss of his life-long partner that a year later—in conjunction with medical problems—he, too, would pass away.

Other than the obvious toll grief would take on her, did a family history of heart disease leave Jonnie worried that she would be heading down the same path as her parents? After all, besides her mother’s stroke, Guerra’s father had had a heart attack at the age of 42 while employed in his own high-stress job as an officer with the Bakersfield Police Department.

“I suppose there were signs that I was headed for a heart attack myself,” Guerra replied. “I remember having trouble breathing awhile back, but I have asthma, so I didn’t think much of it.” She had other tell-tale signs, but they got lost in the realm of reasonable explanations: hot flashes, stress, aches and pains from working too hard and tending to others. “Gosh, I was taking care of everybody but myself,” Guerra said.

One day, Guerra put her foot down and decided it was time to take care of herself. With a history of intestinal cancer in the family, she insisted on having a colonoscopy to check for polyps (an early indication of cancer if they are not cut from the walls of the intestines). Because Guerra had such a strong feeling that something was terribly wrong with her, what happened next was truly extraordinary: she

went into full cardiac and pulmonary arrest during her colonoscopy. She was immediately transferred to the hospital where a 75-percent blockage was discovered in the left main artery of her heart. Blockage in this artery is typically called the "widow maker" because most people don't usually survive this kind of heart attack. But local doctors performed a double bypass that soon put Guerra on the road to recovery. "It's really a miracle that I'm alive," she said. "If I hadn't insisted on having that colonoscopy, I don't know where I'd be today."

The hidden gift in this tragedy was the realization that her life had to drastically change. Guerra went on a special diet, lost weight, and works out at Memorial Hospital's gym two to three times a week where she is carefully monitored while exercising.

Now retired, she's learned to slow down and enjoy life to the fullest. In fact, she treasures her time on earth so much that her husband of 22 years is seeking an early retirement so they can do a little traveling and spend more time together.

"My grandmother used to always say, 'Live each day to the fullest because tomorrow is a mystery.'" Guerra said. At age 53, and with the better half of her life ahead, Jonnie Guerra intends to take her grandmother's advice.



Jonnie
Guerra

Judy
Simmons

in spite of moving to Arizona for the dry climate— problems with high blood pressure in her 20s foreshadowed possible trouble with her heart. But knowing what the future might hold, Simmons took great care of herself: she ate heart-healthy foods, got into tennis, and stayed fit.

And life was good to her. Simmons went on to marry, have three children, and travel around with her husband, Gale's, work in the oil industry. On again, off again residents of Bakersfield for 30 years, she led a productive and happy life. But in her late 50s, in the year 2000, she began to experience a burning sensation in her right shoulder blade. This went on for a year, with initial tests revealing nothing; something that doctors are discovering is not uncommon with women. For example, while angiograms often detect blockage in the larger and much easier to see arteries in a man, a woman's smaller arteries

often hide more difficult to detect problems. Nevertheless, in 2001, Simmons demanded to see a cardiologist. It was then that a blockage was detected, and her first stent—in the month of October—was put in.

This was only the beginning of a six-year odyssey that led to eventual bypass surgery. In 2002, Simmons was referred by doctors in Bakersfield to Dr. Jon Kabashagawa, the Director of the Heart Transplant Program at UCLA. He, in turn, sent her to the nation's foremost specialist in procedures dealing with delicate arteries such as those Simmons had, Dr. Paul S. Teirstein. Dr. Teirstein is the Director of Interventional Disease and Chief of Cardiology at Scripps Green Hospital in La Jolla, California. Teirstein went on to perform a procedure to place a stent in a tiny vessel, and he did this in front of scores of doctors who came from around the country to watch as the master performed his medical wizardry. This was taped so that doctors in the future would benefit from Teirstein's methods. "I felt all the time that I was in such capable hands," Simmons said. "I feel blessed to have ended up with someone as renowned as Dr. Teirstein."

Problems persisted, however. "I'd be lucky to go maybe six months without being in the hospital," Simmons said. She went on to have several more stents put in from 2003 to 2005, ending up with a total of nine for what fast became "stent gridlock" on the highways and byways of the arteries servicing that grand metropolis, the heart.

In 2005, Dr. Teirstein grew worried that there were too many stents. "I think we need to start talking surgery," he told Simmons. So back to UCLA she went, where in October of 2006, all nine life-saving stents were officially excused from duty after bypass surgery. >>

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In spite of fantastic support from her husband and three grown children, Simmons is quite the trooper, toughing out six years of cardio scares that would shake the best of us. "What are you going to do?" she said with philosophical surrender. "It is what it is. You either choose to live with it or you don't. Honest to God, I'm grateful every day that I wake up. I take one day at a time and try to get the most out of life."

Simmons has regular three-month check-ups with Dr. Kabashagawa, who keeps a close eye on her progress. She also uses the gym at Memorial Hospital in Bakersfield where nurses carefully monitor her heart while she works out. Attending Mended Hearts, a local support group for people with heart issues, helps as well. Keeping things in perspective, Simmons feels lucky. "I'm so blessed to have had such marvelous medical care with my family and friends by my side. I am not alone in this journey of heart disease. I always say, 'I have heart disease, heart disease does not have me.'"

To others who may feel overwhelmed or alone, Simmons offers this advice: "You have to take control of your disease by learning all you can and asking many questions. You should listen to your heart and take action. That may mean going to another city or medical care facility. Do what you have to do; it can mean the difference between life or death."

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