

REKISHA HARRIS



Rekisha Harris is a fighter. Her battle to survive heart disease against all odds demonstrates the power of being your own advocate in the healthcare system.

"We are the ones who live in our bodies each day and we have to speak up when something doesn't feel right," she says.

Rekisha knew something wasn't right with her body after she gave birth to her sixth child. She encouraged doctors to look beyond what they assumed was asthma brought on by the pregnancy. She was treated and released, but when she passed out at home a few weeks later she was sure doctors were missing something. Her hunch was right. Following another admission to the hospital, tests revealed an enlarged heart that was surrounded by fluid and a clot in her left ventricle. Doctors again speculated this was a complication from the recent pregnancy—not a longer-term problem. She was prescribed a few medications and sent home.

One month later, with her symptoms worsening and her medication not helping, Rekisha was in the hospital again. This time the news was devastating.

"Doctors told me my heart was functioning at about 15 percent capacity and I would need a transplant," she says. *"The only positive in the news was their belief that I was years away from needing the new heart."*

Relieved to finally have an accurate diagnosis, and looking forward to getting back to relative normalcy with her growing family, Rekisha underwent several surgeries to prep for the future transplant and then went home.

What happened next would test even the strongest of people. Rekisha lasted mere months at home as she slipped into severe heart failure. She had to move into the hospital until a transplant became available.

"I had two nurses assigned to be with me at all times," she says. *"I never even left the heart failure wing because it was too risky."*

Just 32 years old at the time, Rekisha had been in the hospital for the majority of her newborn son's first year of life. She had celebrated all of her children's birthdays and her wedding anniversary in a hospital bed. Unsure of whether a donor heart would arrive in time, doctors warned her to get her affairs in order. Instead, Rekisha began planning her Christmas and New Year's Eve celebrations. Just as she had known that something was not right with her health months before, she was now confident that she would be around to celebrate the holiday season with her family.

Once again, Rekisha's instincts were right. The week before Christmas she underwent a successful heart transplant.

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Nearly a year later, Rekisha is back to taking care of her family, but has made significant changes to her lifestyle.

“My life is not ‘go, go, go’ all the time like it was before,” she says. “I rest more, eat better and take some time for myself.”

Rekisha also takes time to educate other women about being their own health advocates.

“I think we all get used to doing too much and learning to ignore minor ailments or fatigue because that is what women are programmed to do,” she says. “I tell everyone I know to pay attention to any changes in your health and see as many doctors as necessary to be sure your voice is heard.”

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