

An Unexpected Journey

By Debbie Schmid

Heart defect! The words exploded over and over in the young mother's mind as she sat stunned, staring at the doctor. She had brought six-week old Debbie in for her first routine check-up, and now she tried to grasp the importance of these two dreaded words. Heart defect!

How was this possible? She looked at Debbie kicking on the examining table. How could such a beautiful child hide such a terrifying secret? Surely the doctor was mistaken! He must be!

Debbie's mother struggled to listen as the doctor continued; "I want you to take her to Children's Memorial Hospital in Chicago. The specialists there can run tests to determine the extent of the damage. It may take several weeks to get her in so . . ."

The young mother left the doctor's office in shock. She clung to little Debbie, remembering the stormy December day a few weeks earlier when Debbie entered the world—and their hearts. The chill that winter day was nothing compared to the chill that now gripped her.

Three months later, the seemingly endless wait was over. Debbie, now four months old, was seen at Children's Memorial Hospital (CMH). The diagnosis was confirmed. Debbie had a congenital heart defect, but it was still too early to predict how this would affect the little girl's life. (From *The Beauty of Spring* by Debbie Schmid)

Being born in 1959 had both its advantages and disadvantages. Unfortunately, the medical technology and research necessary to help children in situations similar to mine was very limited. And sadly, many of those little ones did not survive

At approximately three years of age, I had a heart catheterization and the original evaluation was diagnosed as being “much worse than the doctors anticipated.”

From what I understand, because of the lack of research here in the states, in 1960, my medical case notes were sent to Europe to be evaluated by the specialists there. Word came back, “We’ve never seen anything like this before. We’re sorry, but there’s nothing we can do to help.” As a result, my parents were given little hope for my condition, and they were told that I would never make it to kindergarten.

Fortunately, I have been blessed with the gift of life, but it has certainly been an unexpected journey. Fifty-six years later, I’m still a CHD survivor, fighting the world’s number one birth defect.

Many of you reading this article today fully understand the impact of those two dreaded words. Heart Defect! Not only do those words come as shock, they often come loaded with fear and one primary question. “What do we do now?”

Looking back, I often wonder how my life may have been different if The Children’s Heart Foundation had been active when I was a little girl. Perhaps today’s research, along with the medical advancements, could have paved a smoother path for me.

Although my personal story is nothing shy of miraculous, I cannot begin to share the impact that The Children’s Heart Foundation (CHF) has had on countless families who are facing congenital heart defects. Those individuals directly involved with The Children’s Heart Foundation will best share their own personal stories; and through them, you will learn that

wonderful strides are being made to help children with congenital heart defects. We must continue to support this great cause.