

## MY STORY

I was strapped in my hospital bed while asking the swarm of cardiologists and neurologists the classic joke.....

"So doctor, will I be able to play the violin again?" Unfortunately, this was no joke. I received the dreadful news that I would be lucky to walk normally let alone think of playing the violin ever again. Similarly, this is not the first time in my life I've heard such devastating news.

I was born with a ventricular septal defect (hole in the heart). At seven months of age, I underwent my first of three open heart surgeries to correct this defect.

Throughout my childhood, I was banned from gym class (every child's dream!) with doctors' fear I might overexert my heart muscle. Without realizing the accumulative effects from lack of exercise, in addition for my love of food, I quickly formed very bad habits.

In my teenage years, my pediatric cardiologist constantly scolded me for being overweight and suggested eating less and exercising more. Like most Americans who are too lazy to maintain an exercise regime, I frequently used the excuse that if I exercised, I was going to kill myself off, which seemed to contradict the whole purpose of exercising in the first place! This eventually led me to becoming one hundred pounds overweight most of my young adult life.

On Valentine's Day 2003, I collapsed of a heart attack, liver failure, congestive heart failure and a stroke which paralyzed me on the left side. This was definitely not one of my better days. My mother found me lying on the kitchen floor. I knew something was wrong when I couldn't get up by myself and was quickly admitted to the hospital. Upon my arrival, the doctors told me the stroke ironically saved my life and if I had waited any longer, I would have died from liver failure. At this moment, I realized how fragile life was.

I was born into a musical family. My father was a violinist and my mother sang with the Metropolitan Opera. Music had always been a positive outlet in my life. Since I wasn't allowed to exercise like a normal child, plunking out melodies and harmonies on the piano was a relaxing and soothing pastime. I obtained my first toy violin at the age of two. Getting extremely frustrated with the sound, I smashed it on the ground and demanded a new one. I received my first "real" violin and fell in love! I remember at the tender age of three, I thought to myself, "This is what I want to do for the rest of my life".

After my last corrective surgery at age 13, I started intense training on the violin. Appropriately, my father was my first violin teacher. He was a perfectionist and a taskmaster. Though I remember begrudgingly suffering through countless five hour lessons, I was soon rewarded with starting my professional orchestra career at the age of fourteen.

Throughout the years, my violin has taken me to many exciting places. I have performed in Carnegie Hall, worked with Leonard Bernstein and toured with

Smokey Robinson. All of this didn't seem to matter much now. There I was, lying in the hospital bed like a vegetable, unable to move half my body and not able to speak. I thought to myself, "I would rather die than not be able to play my violin again". Coincidentally, a few years earlier, I was contemplating what to do with my life when I got too old to play the violin. I never realized that day of reality would come so soon. On one occasion, my mother brought my violin into the hospital for some inspiration. With my arms tangled in tubes and wires, I reluctantly tried to hold the violin in playing position. Within two seconds, it fell onto the hospital bed, and I quickly burst into tears. This was the most discouraging and humbling moment I had ever experienced. As I sat on the hospital bed crushed and with tears streaming down my face, I couldn't believe I had sacrificed most of my life painstakingly and meticulously perfecting the art of violin playing. All that work had been instantly washed down the drain in the blink of an eye.

Eventually, I was discharged from the hospital with physical therapy. In my first session, the therapist told me we were to start working on my toes and my feet. I looked at her and said "No we're not. We are going to start with my fingers and hands". I have two neurologist friends who explained to me there is a smaller window of time for gaining mobility back in the hands than there are for the feet and legs. Taking that into consideration, I turned around and left that physical therapy office determined to play the violin once again.