

**PATIENT:** **Nancy Eastman**

Age 65, Warner, NH

**FAMILY:** 2 grown children, and husband John

**SURGERY:** Single bypass, April 1999

### Cardiac Peer Mentors

*One of the most important things in Nancy's life is her volunteer work.*

Nancy Eastman is one of Concord Hospital's Cardiac Peer Mentors, a unique program started in 2001 and comprising inspiring men and women who have successfully recovered from heart surgeries performed at Concord Hospital. The patient-run group helps cardiac patients adjust to new experiences and lifestyles, answer questions or concerns about surgery after-effects, share individual experiences, support each other in making healthy cardiac decisions, and assist with individual rehabilitation programs.

What makes Nancy such a helpful mentor and volunteer is the same thing that threatened her life—a history of heart disease and, ultimately, cardiac surgery. Both of Nancy's parents suffered from heart disease and her brother, six years older, had a massive coronary before his 56th birthday. Another sibling, an older sister, fortunately has evaded the family's cardiac curse.

Nancy has always respected this genetic threat and taken her cardiac care seriously. She routinely made healthy food choices and regularly exercised. And yet, when out walking with friends one day, Nancy felt a telltale burning sensation in her chest that radiated up to her ear. "I just thought the pace I was walking with my friend was too fast for me," said Nancy, "So I turned around and, just barely, made it home." In spite of chest pains, Nancy went to her teaching job that day. "The day went well, but I returned to school for parent-teacher conferences at night and the pains came back," Nancy recounted. Finally, after feeling pain on her next walk several days later, she knew it was time to take action and went to her doctor who ordered a stress test.

The results of that test, 10 years ago, sounded all too familiar to Nancy and her family. She was diagnosed with coronary artery disease. Subsequent cardiac catheterization demonstrated a life-threatening blockage.

"My left anterior descending artery was 99 percent clogged and calcified. It was so blocked that my doctor at Concord Hospital actually drilled it out before inserting a stent," she remembers. Despite the stent, by August the scar tissue had filled in the left anterior descending coronary vessel and the pain was back, despite Nancy's redoubled attention to cardiac rehabilitation. Unfortunately, even though she had avoided a heart attack and was able to conduct a relatively normal and active life, Nancy underwent single bypass surgery at Concord Hospital.

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“This was the best preventative measure I could have taken,” Nancy shared. It wasn’t the solution to her cardiac health but it was a progressive and important step. After this surgery, she experienced atrial fibrillation, a rapid irregular heartbeat, while in the Hospital—common in a quarter of all heart surgery patients—but soon managed to return home and participate in a 20-week Concord Hospital rehabilitation program named *Take Heart*, which was offered by the Hospital a decade ago. “We met once a week for group exercise, meditation, and relaxation. Then we all shared a healthy meal and openly discussed managing the three-legged stool of stress, health, and nutrition.” Nancy also met Addie Camelio, the Concord Hospital Social Worker who organizes Cardiac Peer Mentors and was taking the class along with other staffers.

Nancy’s intermittent atrial fibrillation grew increasingly worse, lasting for hours every other day or so. “At one point, my cell phone was resting on my chest and my doctor could see it moving at a rapid pace,” she recalls. “Dr. Richard Boss of Concord Hospital Cardiac Associates decided we could address this condition with a simple procedure, assuring me he would get me back to normal. I liked that I could talk to him in a very frank and open way.”

In 2008, with medications in hand to control her irregular heartbeat, Nancy enjoyed the vacation of a lifetime – a trip to the Beijing Olympics and Tibet. When she returned home she underwent yet another procedure called a cardiac ablation procedure. Dr. Paul Steiner, Director of Electrophysiology at Concord Hospital, performed the procedure. Nancy said, “Dr. Steiner was passionate about this new technique and has also joined us as a speaker at our Peer Mentor meetings.”

***Cardiac ablation is a relatively noninvasive procedure that involves inserting catheters into the heart muscle. Electrodes at the tip of the catheter gather data and a variety of electrical measurements are made. The data pinpoints the location of the faulty electrical site in the heart. Once the damaged site is confirmed, high frequency radio waves are used to scar a small amount of tissue, ending the disturbance of electrical flow through the heart and restoring a healthy heart rhythm.***

For Nancy and other volunteers at Concord Hospital, the parallel paths of cardiac surgery and peer mentoring all lead in the same direction—to better cardiac health, more informed and confident decision making, and a supportive, engaged Hospital community. “As a cardiac surgery patient,” Nancy added, “I eat well and keep up with my medication so I can reach my goal — to be as healthy and well as possible living with coronary artery disease.” As one of the original members of the Cardiac Peer Mentor group, Nancy strives to help others reach inspiring goals of their own.

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