

2 Birthdays

By: Tony Valnes

The song "2 Birthdays" came to me one night before I went to bed. I grabbed my guitar and the words just started flowing. I wrote the song as a birthday gift to my wife, Tiffany, when we were dating. She had a heart transplant when she was 17. The song is a true story about how my wife has changed my life. Like the song says, "My heart may be broken but at least it's still the same."

My wife, Tiffany, was born with a hole between the chambers of her heart, but the doctors didn't discover this until she was 4 years old. She had her first open heart surgery to repair the hole at the age of 4. Shortly before going into surgery she told her mother that she was not afraid to die, but she did not want to miss out on anything. They say that kids bounce back from surgery faster than adults, and that must be true. There are pictures of her riding a tricycle in the hallway of the hospital within days after surgery.

At the age of 9, Tiffany had a second open heart surgery to place an artificial mitral valve in her heart. This is the surgery that started limitations in school activities. This was very challenging for her at nine years old. She didn't want to miss out on anything. She was unable to participate in sports due to the blood thinners she was on for her mitral valve. Weary from being held back because of her heart, as a teenager, she convinced her doctors to let her go back to cheerleading.

When she was 15 years old, Tiffany had a third open heart surgery to put a larger artificial mitral valve in her heart. Within 24 hours of coming out of surgery, she had a massive heart attack. The nurses started CPR and fortunately the cardiac surgeon was only three minutes away. He tore her chest incision open with his bare hands and began massaging her heart to get it started. She was rushed back into surgery to find that the massive heart attack had damaged the muscle severely.

I can't imagine the thoughts that were going through her family's mind. They were called into a small room, approached by the Chaplain to discuss the final wishes, and told to say their final goodbyes. She made it out of surgery, but her heart was being pumped by a machine. She was unable to breathe without total life support. They left her chest incision open with a clear transparent piece of tape across her chest. After going in and out of surgery four continuous times, they decided to put her on the heart transplant list. She left the Fargo, North Dakota, hospital with a black eye, from the IV pole that fell across her face and a dopamine burn half the size of her forearm that happened during her heart attack while the nurses were trying to revive her.

Tiffany was then put in a Minneapolis Hospital for three weeks before she was able to breathe without the machines. She had bed sores on the back of her skull from lying in bed for so long. She was in the intensive care unit for three more months waiting at the top of the transplant list. Her sister and brother were without their mom. They were living with their grandma or aunt, wanting their family back home. She didn't want to miss out on anything more back home, homecoming, prom, football games and time with friends and family. Like the song says, she really was "Lying in bed just trying to stay sane."

While waiting those three months in the hospital, nurses tried to make the best of it for her. They organized a shopping trip and went to the mall with mom, grandma, two nurses, IV and IV poles. She bought a pair of high tops because she was developing foot drop from being in a hospital bed for months.

While in ICU, Tiffany got the news they had found a heart. Her family came to the hospital, and she was prepped for surgery. When she awoke later that night she realized she did not receive the heart. The donor heart was too small. After waiting in ICU for three months, she was allowed to return home to wait on the list there.

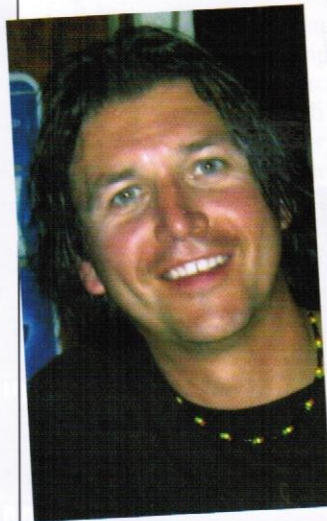
Tiffany was not the kind of person to keep down. She returned to school and began attending classes although she would often fall asleep. She was physically exhausted due to the lack of heart function. Football players in her class would carry her up the stairs, because she was too weak to walk one flight of stairs. Tiffany refused to give up but as the line in the song says, Tiffany truly did miss half her high school years.

After waiting on the transplant list for another year and a half, Tiffany's kidneys and other organs started shutting down due to the lack of blood flow from her heart. She had multiple procedures due to this. Her femoral artery was narrowing because the heart was not pumping blood and had surgery to have an artery ballooned out to become larger. The artery ruptured and she was rushed back into surgery.

At home Tiffany's mom slept with a baby monitor in her room in case Tiffany couldn't get out of bed because she was so weak. She woke up one night and knew something was wrong but was unable to move or even talk because she was so weak. Her mom somehow woke up and discovered that she barely had a blood pressure. They went to the emergency room to discover that her kidneys were shutting down. She waited a week and received the heart transplant the day before her 17th birthday. Her family always said she has "2 Birthdays," her real birthday and her heart birthday. This is where I got the line in the song, "You were only 17 when you got your 2nd breath of life."

Tiffany has had 7 open heart surgeries, a heart transplant. She has had her appendix and gallbladder out, many heart angiograms, many heart biopsies, beginning with one a week, then one every other week and finally tapering off to every six months to check for rejection.

Tiffany always said that she never thought that anyone would want to marry her due to her medical bills and her life



expectancy of 15 years. We were married in August of 2003. The song says "Just living your life day to day," and that is exactly what Tiffany is doing.

Tiffany had severe left shoulder pains for over two years, waking her at night as well as at random times during the day. She had a pacemaker put in shortly after our wedding and they discovered rejection. She had 2-75% 2-85% and 1-95% blocked arteries in her heart. It was a type of rejection, not like plaque or cholesterol; it was inflammation in the walls of the arteries of her heart. Doctors told us she would need another transplant. Her tricuspid valve was also not working. (It's funny the first thing they did was start telling me that I should think about fundraisers etc., because of the cost of the second heart transplant that would not be covered by insurance. She wasn't even on the list, and the hospital was worried about money.) They eventually told Tiffany and I that she was too high risk to have another transplant. So, we found a hospital that felt confident in doing the surgery and she was put back on the list for two years.

Tiffany has a tricuspid valve leak and is in rejection. She is stable and on the heart transplant list at a class 7. This means if she starts getting worse, her place is held on the list. She has had 12 to 15 stints (we lost count) put in the arteries of her heart for blockages that the rejection is causing. She has been diagnosed with Crohn's disease, but went into acute renal failure before they finally diagnosed it. She has had over 10 spots of squamous cell carcinoma (skin cancer) removed, which is caused by the immunosuppressant drugs that she has to take. She takes 30 plus pills to function on a daily basis, and often carries two purses, one just for pills. That is what the line, "Popping pills just to stay alive, just to stay in the game," is about.

After going through all the surgical procedures, Tiffany became a registered nurse and now works in the operating room to cover the cost of medical bills and prescriptions. She says I support her shopping habit. Tiffany's mom went to college for the first time shortly after Tiffany had her heart transplant and is now a registered nurse as well.

My wife, Tiffany has changed many lives. Many have told us she is an inspiration to them. The song says, she is "Just walking through life with her head held high," and this is so true. In her own words, she said, "I am not afraid to die, I just don't want to miss out on anything. I know that

there are amazing things to look forward to in heaven, I also know that there are a lot of things God put on this earth I truly enjoy and I am going to miss out on. It is not how long you have lived, but how you have lived that counts."

I use the song "2 Birthdays" to create donor awareness. I do radio interviews and meet a lot of people who tell me a story of their friend or loved one who was either a donor or received organ donation. At live shows, with my band Eclipse, when we perform "2 Birthdays," people hold up their driver's licenses to show they are a donor. Some fans come back to shows months later and tell me they changed their driver's license, and they are now a donor after hearing the song and the story behind it. (Life... Live it... Give it)

Like the song says, "We could all learn a lot from a girl like you."

