

# 2 Birthdays

By: Tony Valnes

**T**he 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

