

Heartland Bank's Jeri Barajas - Finding The Heart to Help Others

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Jeri Barajas was an avid, longtime runner. She considered herself a health nut. She had never been overweight and didn't have a single strain of heart disease in her family. Her blood pressure and cholesterol had always been normal. But in January 2004, when she was rushed to the emergency room and told she was in stage three of congestive heart failure, she realized the symptoms were not always clear.

At the age of 41, Barajas had all the symptoms of a person with heart disease, but none of the signs of what caused it. Right before her admittance to the ER, she and the doctor she was seeing for bronchitis, were dumbfounded as to her condition. She had gained 15 pounds in only a week, her abdomen was swollen, and she could not walk half a block or climb stairs. In a nightmarish setting, Barajas was told within the 15 minutes of her arrival to the hospital that she would have heart surgery to have a temporary pace maker implanted. Before the surgery, she had a pulse of 23 and her veins were collapsing. The nurse couldn't even test her blood pressure. Her heart was enlarged. Her cardiologist didn't think she would make it through the night. When she did and then made it a few more days, she was the talk of the cardiac intensive care staff. The doctors didn't see enough progress however and were discussing a heart transplant, they asked Barajas if she had a living will and desired to see a priest. Immediate thoughts raced through her head. "You think of all these things like I'll have to sell the house, go onto disability, the insurance, etc. You think about really having to change everything in your life," she said. Barajas was finally diagnosed with cardiomyopathy and permanent heart damage. She was told a virus had attacked her heart. After three weeks in the hospital, the physician's tests weren't coming up with much. "I went through 2 ½ years of testing, because they couldn't find out what caused it, and were not sure if it would come back or not."

Fortunately, Barajas was getting stronger. After four weeks in intensive care, her condition had stabilized and her heart had gone back to its normal size. Two weeks later she was released from the hospital, but found recuperation would be a long road ahead. It took six months of testing and monitoring without any physical activity. After this period, she was told she could walk,

but not run. Another year and half was spent getting her permanent pacemaker regulated that she still wears today. "Although my heart muscle is strong, my heart doesn't know how to beat on its own," said Barajas. In 2008, she was told her heart was strong.

Today she is running three miles a day and feels like her old self, with a little more drive to educate others about heart failure. There are common thoughts about heart failure and Barajas' case didn't follow suit. "I think that maybe if my heart failure hurt I would have been more apt to push the doctor to check further into my symptoms. For me and a lot of people, you think of heart disease and you think it will be excruciating pain and shortness of breath like when you have a heart attack. Heart failure isn't like that; your heart just stops working."

Barajas volunteers for the American Heart Association in the sector called Go Red for Women. This particular cause works to provide education for women about heart disease as well as the differences between the symptoms for men and women. Barajas notes the importance of knowing that there are indeed differences. She stresses the importance of also knowing what your basic numbers are in terms of blood pressure and cholesterol. Barajas noted, "Heart disease kills more women, than breast cancer does. I want women to know what I didn't."

Go Red for Women hosts an annual luncheon in November that provides the community with knowledge about women and their hearts. February is Heart Awareness month and Barajas will be featured on a Survivor Wall at the Denver Center for Performing Arts as well as around Cherry Creek beginning Feb. 18. There will also be a Heart Ball at the end of February and the annual Heart Walk in June.

Barajas has served on the board of the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, the Colorado Women Chamber of Commerce, Denver Business Women's Network, The Hispanic Annual Salute and Museo De Las Americas just to name a few. She also currently serves on the Board of Directors for the Colorado Judicial Institute. Barajas is a Vice President in the Commercial Banking Division for Heartland Bank in Denver. She is a 5th generation Colorado native and is married to Judge Johnny Barajas.

For more information on how to protect your heart and how others are inspiring heart care visit goredforwomen.org or americanheart.org.

Remember Friday, Feb. 5 is National Wear Red Day to stand up and speak out against heart disease in women.