

# “The Wakeup Call That Saved Me”

Three survivors share how a serious heart-health scare led them to change their lives. AS TOLD TO LESLIE GOLDMAN

## *I made over my...* **PRIORITIES**

Paula Rice, 63  
New York City

**U**ntil 2000, I was an independent business owner. But when my mom developed dementia and came to live with me, that changed. My days became consumed with caregiving: doctor visits, pharmacy runs and insurance calls.

### *Losing myself*

Watching my mother deteriorate was physically, emotionally and financially draining. I had no time for exercise, lost my business and spent my pension fund caring for her. She passed away in 2008, and I ignored my health as I rebuilt my life. (I eventually got a job at the Alzheimer’s Association.)

### *Tipping point*

In winter 2012, after a week of flu-like symptoms—diarrhea, shortness of breath and fatigue—a concerned friend suggested I go to the ER. The doctor said that my heart rate was dangerously high and admitted me for testing. That night, I went into cardiac arrest and my heart stopped for 15 minutes. Eventually, doctors were able to get my heart back into a healthy rhythm, and I had a procedure called an ablation to correct the structural problems.

Paula is a volunteer for the American Heart Association’s Go Red for Women campaign.



### *Taking back my life*

I realized it was time to re-prioritize. I started doing walking meditation, practicing yoga and eating more oatmeal, fish, chicken, fruits and veggies. I became proactive about my healthcare, paying close attention to my numbers. I monitor my blood pressure at home and never miss a checkup or biannual cardiologist visit. I also insist on in-person appointments to discuss test results, which gives me a more thorough snapshot of my health and a strong sense of empowerment.

“Challenges shouldn’t stop you from focusing on your health. At the very least schedule a well-woman visit, which is covered by most insurance plans, thanks to the Affordable Care Act.”



## I made over my... **FAMILY RECIPES**

Meliah Bowers Jefferson, 36  
Greenville, SC

**M**y older sister had a heart attack in 2005, when she was just 34. I was 235 pounds and scared of the same fate, so I lost 70 pounds through diet and exercise. I kept it off for a few years; I thought my heart was in the clear.

### Confusing diagnosis

In April 2013, I woke up with a headache and started sweating profusely later in the day. I also felt weak and chilled. At the hospital, I was diagnosed with pneumonia and sent home. A week later, at a checkup, the doctor read the

results of a blood panel and referred me to a cardiologist. Further tests revealed evidence of a recent heart attack, and I had a complete blockage in one of my arteries. My heart was working at 50% capacity. I left the hospital with two stents and a defibrillator. I was 33.

### New meal mindset

Looking back, many of my seemingly healthy choices were flawed. The lean protein I ate (like deli turkey) was packed with sodium. Now I make healthier replacements for my Southern family's heavy favorites, like turkey burgers seasoned with diced onions and a bit of ranch dressing mix. Instead of pie, I mix chopped apples with a touch of brown sugar and cinnamon, then top with an oatmeal and nut crumble.



Meliah (an AHA volunteer) and her daughter, Ryan, cook together.

“You don't need to give up taste or your cultural heritage to eat in a heart-friendly way.”



## I made over my... **CAREER**

Myra Robin, 49  
Cecilia, LA

**F**or more than a decade, I worked for a high-tech metal manufacturer. As a woman in a male-dominated industry, I felt a constant need to prove myself as I climbed the corporate ladder.

“It's important to honestly assess your stress levels. I loved my job, but it ultimately wasn't good for my heart.”



### Reality check

One night in 2009, I felt pressure, then pain, in my chest. I was having a massive “widow-maker” heart attack. In the hospital, surgery complications deprived my heart of oxygen and I lost almost half the pumping power.

### Divine sign

I stopped smoking, eliminated salt and cut down on my work hours. At my four-month follow-up, my doctor said, “Your heart isn't recovering. You need to seriously rethink your job.”

Soon after giving my notice, I saw an ad for a part-time secretary at my church. I now do low-key tasks like greet visitors and light accounting. It leaves me time for walking, biking and heart-healthy cooking. And I have reconnected with my faith, perhaps the biggest bonus of all.



Myra is trained as a WomenHeart Champion. She shares her story with others and leads survivor support groups.