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# A new chance at life leads to artistic opportunity

By Lisa Welz

September 11, 2001, is a date few will forget. Mary Tuminello has another reason to recall that day as it set her on a path that led from one diagnosis to another, more unthinkable one—heart disease at the age of 38.

The Oswego resident recalled that day and an emergency trip to the hospital with severe abdominal pain. She underwent surgery for a burst appendix and came out of anesthesia to find out she had Crohn's Disease and that doctors had removed not only an inflammatory growth, but also had done a colon resection, removing about 18 inches.

Visits to her gastroenterologist went along routinely until one day, she recalled, "He would do scans every now and then of my intestines and colon, to make sure that the Crohn's was in check and everything was ok. On one of those scans he noticed that I had a fatty liver. He said I wouldn't worry about that- I only see that in old people or heart patients. I said, wait a minute; I'd been experiencing shortness of breath. Something new was coming on where I would get winded walking up this little incline on my driveway, going up the stairs, and carrying my purse felt like a load."

It was at that point she was sent to a cardiologist for the first time. Tuminello said, "She was a wonderful doctor and did tests right away—an echocardiogram and EKG, stress tests and everything—but she knew right away from the echocardiogram what the problem was. It was called dilated cardiomyopathy, an enlarged heart. It was determined later, while I was being tested as a candidate (for a heart transplant) that it was genetic."

The process to becoming approved as a transplant candidate is quite lengthy, involving a number of physical tests, followed by visits to a social worker, and an evaluation to make sure the candidate has home support.

She explained, "If you can't take care of yourself, or have the support to take care of yourself, and do what you're supposed to do after you get the heart, they're not going to give it to you because you don't have a chance of survival. They want to make sure that the people they're giving these precious organs to are going to have a good chance of keeping them and surviving...if you're not going to follow the rules, then they're going to give it to somebody else who's going to. They're very serious about it."

Tuminello's doctors were amazed that she had survived two pregnancies with her unknown heart condition—something she'd had since birth but was unaware of—telling her that had she waited until her 30's to have her daughters, the pregnancies would have killed her due to the increased blood flow and taxation on the heart.

She credits her doctors and staff, both at Dreyer Medical Center in Aurora and at Loyola University Medical Center for her care and survival. She was given drug therapy to lessen the taxation on her heart as much as possible and, a year later, a pacemaker and defibrillator. Over time, she went through three pacemakers, once due to a new model, and another time due to the battery needing replacement. When that occurs, they change out the whole unit.

By 2010 Tuminello was on the waiting list for a heart. Doctors had told her they'd done all they could for her; the only thing left was a new heart and no one could say how long that would take, if it ever did.

She remembered telling the nurses at Loyola, "You know, I'm going to go in and get this battery change done and



Oswegoan Mary Tuminello creates biodegradable urns to share the beauty she sees in the world after her heart transplant.

you're going to call me and say you have a new heart, and I won't need this anymore. She said, you know, stranger things have happened."

### **A new heart**

"So, December 16, 2010, I went to Mercy Hospital outpatient to have this done and my husband took me. You have to get there early in the morning and can't eat anything because it's a surgery, but you're home by about 5. It's a full day. They put it in, we got home, and I hadn't eaten anything since midnight," she said.

Hungry, they agreed her husband would go to the store for some groceries. Within 20 minutes, she got the call that would, once again, change her life. "Loyola called and said, 'Hi, Mary. Can you come in? We have a heart for you,'" Tuminello said, a faraway look in her eyes as the telling took her back to that day.

With a laugh, she came back, and said it was just as she'd predicted. "I didn't expect to be home only 20 minutes, and I'm all chilled out because I'm on the pain killers, so it couldn't have been more perfect."

The timing of it allowed her to skip what would have been the next procedure, two days later, of installation of a left ventricular assist device (LVAD), a heart pump that is worn internally with tubes that come out of the body and are attached to a battery pack worn around the waist.

At that point, life had changed a lot for Tuminello. She wasn't allowed to drive due to a medication she was taking, she stopped working for their family real estate appraisal business, and she had a great

many doctor's appointments.

A bit in shock, she called her husband home from the store, and they headed to Loyola. There had been a false alarm a month before when, during a doctor visit, she was told they may have a heart for her if the person ahead of her in line didn't call within the hour. Transplant candidates are not allowed to travel farther than two hours while on the list so they can make it to the hospital in time should a heart become available for them.

The person ahead of her did call, but the experience prompted her to get herself organized and served to make her realize, she said, "That it is real and could happen at the drop of a hat. I took that opportunity to organize things, to make things as easy as I could for my family. At the time my younger daughter was a sophomore at Oswego High School and my older daughter was in college."

"My younger daughter saw a lot of what was going on, and she grew up fast that year," Tuminello said. "There was nothing I could have done about it, but I'm sure it has shaped her life, to some degree, to see her mother go through that. It's not anything that I wished to do to her. There was so much fear, and there still is."

One of those growing up moments came the snowy winter evening she went with her daughter and her boyfriend to the crystals concert at the high school. They didn't park very far from the door, and she said it didn't really occur to any of them to drop her off. The farther she walked, the more she labored to breathe and slowed down. As her daughter disappeared into

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