

# Strong-Hearted After Heart Surgery

**M**OMMY, I THINK I'M GOING to die tonight," she whispered.

Two hours later on Christmas night, she groggily opened her eyes in a hospital bed. That Christmas, her most memorable present was a pain in her back from the 8-inch needle that had drained quickly rising fluid from inside her lungs, saving her life.

Again.  
By age 14, Jessica Colter, junior, had endured three open heart surgeries. She was born with a rare heart disease called Truncus Arteriosus that, without surgery, probably would have killed her before her first birthday.

"My heart was failing," Jessica said. "If I hadn't gotten any one of those surgeries, I would not be alive."

With her heart defect, Jessica's pulmonary artery and her aorta were merged, sharing a blood supply from one artery instead of the usual two. Her doctors fixed this in her first surgery, but in fourth grade her pulmonary artery was worn out, and it had to be replaced.

"They tested me when I got to the hospital, and they told me that the stents they had been using to help my heart weren't enough," Jessica said. "And that I would have to have my pulmonary artery replaced again."

Artery replacements meant

surgery, followed by months of recovery.

"You could tell that my parents put a strong face on for me," Jessica said. "To me, it was like my first surgery because I was too young to remember the first one. But to them, it was all the pain of the first surgery, except now I knew too much for them to just stop the crying."

The surgery went smoothly, and the doctors released her to go home with the idea it would be another 10 years before that artery would need to be replaced. Jessica started to learn to realize when her body was telling her when everything was okay and when it wasn't.

"On Christmas about a month after my second surgery, I just felt horrible all-around," Jessica said. "I didn't want to open presents or celebrate. I felt sick, and my mom could tell. She asked me if I felt okay."

Jessica's answer to her mother was short, but not sweet.

"Mommy," she said, "I think I'm going to die tonight."

Barely able to see the numbers on the phone through the tears running down her face, Jessica's mom dialed the cardiologist. He met them in the ER, gave Jessica a scan, and found that there was fluid streaming into her lungs.

"I had just had surgery, so I

"Now I knew too much about the problems going on inside my body for them to just stop the crying and rock me to sleep."

- Jessica Colter, junior

thought it meant that I was fixed and everything would be fine," Jessica said. "But it wasn't. People always know that complications can happen, but no one really expects any to happen to them."

After six months of recovery and delivered cards from her Tillman classmates, Jessica slowly got to return to school. She was greeted at the door by a gigantic "Welcome back!" poster, signed by everyone in the school. She continued to get check-ups every six months to make sure everything was running smoothly. She got to participate in some activities, and after almost 10 years of Kirkwood cheerleading clinics and camps, she would finally get to try out for the squad that spring.

But in October of eighth grade, one of her tests came back with results that caused alarm.

A cardiologist came into Jessica's hospital room and talked with her family privately. The only words that Jessica understood were "heart" and "surgery."

"It took me a while to comprehend," Jessica said. "My family and I thought I would make it at least through high school from just the one surgery. Then all of a sudden, my whole life stopped, and I was a patient on restrictions again."

Her surgery was scheduled for March 16, 2009; two days before

cheerleading tryouts. She was devastated she would not get to cheer, and memories of her previous surgery haunted her the night before her surgery, as she laid in her brother's bed, crying.

"He gave me a hug, looked at me, and told me everything was going to be okay," Jessica said. "He was one of the first people to say that [whom] I actually believed."

Jessica's surgery was flawless, and when she started high school in the fall, she was able to join the cheerleading squad, despite the fact that she had missed tryouts. Others were not so accepting of her story, though.  
"Freshman year came, and people would tell me how ugly [my scar] was, and they would say that they knew I had a hole in my heart. It took me a really long time to realize that what those people were saying wasn't true and to get back to being proud of my scar," Jessica said. "I know that there are going to be more surgeries, and I know that is part of who I am. I am proud of it. To know that I have it reminds me that I got through everything that was thrown at me."

story by Grace Godsy design by Allie Leath  
photos by Kelley Ludbrook and Emily Broderick

from me

Jessica



photos courtesy of Jessica Colter

Date of Birth: 12/21/95  
Grade: 11

**If you had \$1 million, what would you spend it on?**

"I would pay my parents back for all the money they have given me, then go to Hawaii with my friends and family and swim with dolphins."

**What do you want to be when you're older?**

"I want to either be a hair stylist or an echocardiogram technician for kids with heart defects like me."

**If you could meet any person and ask them a question, who would it be and what would you ask?**

"I would want to meet Demi Lovato and ask her how she got through everything she went through with being bullied, since I was bullied and had sort of similar experiences. I look up to her because of that."

## Season-Stopping Surgery

Going to the doctor's office for a stomach flu, Marik Lingo, freshman, did not expect to start a three-year whirlwind of hospital visits, surgeries and chemotherapy.

Her doctors found a ruptured appendix and she was called into surgery. It was there doctors discovered she had leukemia. Just a few

months later, chemotherapy began and lasted the next two years.

"When my parents told me I was going to lose my hair, I didn't even mind," Marik said. "I was only seven years old, so it didn't really matter that much to me."

But on her last day of treatment, the doctors found the leukemia had

caused her heart's right ventricle to shut down. Marik was now wait listed for a heart transplant.

"We had the beeper that was supposed to let us know when my new heart would be ready for about three months, and we got three false alarm calls," Marik said.

It was not a false alarm, however, when they received a call May 10, Marik had surgery that night. Following her transplant, she recovered and has been healthy ever

since. In addition to maintaining her health, she and her family started the Marikle Foundation.

"[My classmates] would ask me why I didn't have hair or why I had a scar on my chest, so I would get to tell them," Marik said. "In high school, I've had friends that didn't know about any of that until I got to know them better. People don't really know that I had leukemia, because you can't really tell anymore, but I still have the scar."



Marik Lingo, freshman

# JESSICA COLTER



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