INSPIRING HOPE

Joseph Atria - "Giving back is so important to me"

A few weeks after birth I was diagnosed with **congenitally corrected transposition with ventricular inversion** (basically my heart chambers and blood flow are reversed and inverted). This defect is often, as in my case, associated with many other defects including a large hole between the lower ventricles, sub pulmonary stenosis, (narrowing of the artery) and, cor-triatriatum (tissue dividing the upper right atrium into two areas). Although nature created these defects, it also did a wonderful job placing my heart and blood flow in balance. This balance allowed for time to delay difficult corrective surgery. The main issue I had to deal with as a child was once I began to exercise in any short amount, my blood oxygen levels would plummet leaving me quite out of breath and physically leading to blueness in my lips and fingers. I was able to have a normal childhood although with many restrictions and uncertainties. I often struggled to tell others that I had to rest and try to not feel like I was quitting activities. These stresses were greatly relieved and helped by wonderful support from my family and friends.

To this day, I am sure my heart defects were more difficult on my parents than myself with the many questions and worries they had. Their strength was a guiding force in helping me get past my issues and become successful in so many ways. My parents were truly the ones who had to first deal with my heart disease. Forty years ago they did not have any support organizations to go to for help, so they helped form a parent support group called Heart to Heart. Over my childhood and to this day research into pediatric heart disease has advanced the knowledge and techniques into helping correct and heal children and young adults. It was these advancements and the wonderful medical professionals at Children's Hospital in Pittsburgh that allowed me to have successful surgery, after I graduated college at age 22. During my time in the hospital as an adult, I was very aware and struck by the many battles children were facing and this showed me that my life was not so bad and that I also needed to try and help in whatever small manner I could to help them and their families deal with the difficulties of heart disease.

Since my childhood, my cardiologist began the Bill Neches' Heart Camp for children with heart disease. The camp allows the kids to be just that, kids, and enjoy the camp experience, but they get so much more… such as interaction with their medical staff in a fun setting instead of just in the hospital and making life-long friendships with others that have to deal with similar everyday issues. Volunteering at this camp has been an absolute joy.

I have recently moved to Columbus with my wife Karen and we are enjoying all the city has to offer. Where I used to struggle to run the length of a basketball court I am now running, hiking, and biking many miles at a time and feel absolutely great. I have seen how support groups such as Heart to Heart for my parents and Heart Camp for the kids can help in so many ways that is why I am excited to be apart of "Mended Hearts of Central Ohio" as they are one of those great organizations that give back and help those in need.

If you have had similar experiences or would like to talk to Joseph about living with heart disease, his contact information is listed below.

Mended Hearts of Central Ohio
www.MendedHeartsCentralOhio.org - 2600atria@live.com
It is great to be alive – and to help others