

Heart transplant survivor shakes off sheltered childhood to enjoy life

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Kendra Plumley, now 29, needed a heart transplant at age 21 months. Photo courtesy: Kendra Plumley

Kendra Plumley didn't spend her childhood running around with other kids on her street, having friends over for sleepovers, or spending lazy summer days by the pool. Instead, she spent most of her time indoors. It wasn't a choice. She had to protect her new heart.

Today, the 29-year-old from Midlothian, Texas, is making up for lost time by embracing all that life has to offer.

"I know that I'm a miracle," Plumley said. "My heart was killing me."

Plumley was born in 1988 with dilated cardiomyopathy. People with this condition have an enlarged left ventricle in their heart that is too weak to pump blood correctly. Early on, she said, her mother suspected something was wrong. Initially, though, her doctors attributed her problems eating to acid reflux. But before long, her doctors realized the situation was more dire. Tests showed she had dilated cardiomyopathy—the same condition her father had.

When she was 21 months old, she had a [heart transplant](#).

Initially, life didn't get much easier. Her mother had to keep her on a strict drug regimen and there was what seemed like an endless schedule of follow-up visits to her cardiologist. Plumley has needed multiple surgeries since her transplant to correct an intestinal problem, remove multiple cysts and manage gum overgrowth due to medications. She had pneumonia several times, and almost died from the infection.

Plumley said her mother constantly worried about her and, to try to keep her healthy, didn't let her interact much with other kids. "All I ever wanted [was] just to be a kid," said Plumley.

At school, some of her classmates picked on her relentlessly, in part because one of the medications she had to take caused her to have excess

hair growth on her arms and legs.

Even now as an adult, she said, some social situations are still hard for her to navigate. But she's got better tools to handle it. "I've grown a lot," she said.

Susan Daneman was the assistant director of nursing in the transplant unit at Children's Medical Center Dallas when Plumley received her new heart. The longtime nurse said her patient was quiet and intense, but also a "very sweet, precious child" who assumed a great deal of responsibility at a young age, following instructions to the letter.

Daneman is aware that many children who receive new hearts don't live as long as Plumley, and said her former patient has done an excellent job taking care of her health. A recent study showed that children between ages 1 and 5 who got a [new heart](#) lived about an additional 21 years if they survived the first year after the procedure.

"I just loved watching her grow into a beautiful young woman who is independent and out there in the workforce and doing wonderful things with her life," said Daneman. "I wish all my patients could be like her."

Plumley's sister, Ashley, said she admired her younger sister's strength and resilience in the face of the constant poking and prodding she had to endure as a child.

"I really look up to her for everything she's been through—and how far she has come," she said. Ashley said she often shares her family's story in hopes of encouraging others to become organ donors.

These days, Plumley works as a construction trade show coordinator and is engaged. And she's pursuing her passion for photography. Her favorite assignments, she said, are taking pictures of newborns.

As the 28th anniversary of her transplant approaches, Plumley finds herself thinking about what she went through, and how far she has come. Moving out on her own at 18 was a significant turning point, she said, pushing her to find her voice, get out of her comfort zone and take risks.

She's still afraid of picking up germs, but that doesn't stop her from traveling. Now and then, she'll take her 1970 Ford Mustang out for a spin. She has numerous tattoos, including one in memory of her father, who died of [heart](#) failure in 2000.

After living so many years with restrictions, she said, "Nobody was ever going to tell me I wasn't going to do something again."

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