

She refuses to let a heart-stopping moment slow her

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Amy Cavaliere and family. Two years ago, at age 35, a piece of her heart literally tore off.

Creating art and tackling do-it-yourself projects are soothing pastimes for many people, and 37-year-old Amy Cavaliere is one of them.

The mother of three from Royersford, Pennsylvania—about a half hour from Philadelphia—enjoys making pallet wall art that combines hand-stenciled words and imagery on stained wood. In fact, she was planning to franchise a popular workshop that offers classes devoted to the activity.

"You go in with friends, drink wine and make a custom piece of wooden pallet art for your home decor," she said. "It's fun." Unfortunately, fate had other plans.

One morning in February 2017, while getting her children ready for school, Amy felt a heavy sensation in her chest. Her arms began to ache so badly that she couldn't finish brushing her daughter's hair. Within minutes, her skin turned pale and she started to hyperventilate.

Although Amy had never experienced a panic attack, that was her best guess about what was happening.

"What else could it be?" she said. After all, she was young, healthy and active, regularly participating in spinning classes and playing competitive tennis matches against her husband, John Paul.

Admittedly stubborn by nature, Amy was adamant that John Paul not dial 911. He did it anyway. Her stubborn streak continued when the paramedics arrived. She insisted upon walking to the ambulance. As paramedics checked her vital signs, she tried to convince them that she was fine.

Then her heart stopped.

As the ambulance sped to the hospital, paramedic Dave Sauls performed CPR. "I kept expecting her to come out of it," he said, "but it wasn't happening."

At the emergency room, the nurses took over chest compressions and continued to perform CPR and AED shocks for nearly 45 minutes.

An angiogram revealed a 100 percent blockage of her left anterior descending artery. This type of [heart attack](#) is commonly known as the widow maker. Worse yet, the blockage was caused by spontaneous coronary artery dissection (SCAD), meaning a tear in the artery wall.

SCAD is a rare event that occurs mostly in women (about 80 percent), with an average age younger than 50. Other disorders are believed to make people more likely to suffer SCAD. One of them is a disease of the blood vessels called fibromuscular dysplasia, which Amy was later diagnosed with having.

At her local hospital, doctors decided she needed more specialized help than they could provide.

Amy spent nine days in a medically induced coma. Once she awoke, she saw John Paul sitting at the foot of her hospital bed. She had no idea of what had happened.

After the sedatives and other medications left her system, Amy felt so wired she couldn't sleep a wink for two straight days ("my eyes were like saucers," she said). Watching the clock tick away hour by hour, she was terrified she could experience another heart attack at any moment. Any sort of chest pain causes her anxiety to this day.

"Since I don't remember what it felt like, I don't have a frame of reference," she said. "It's terrifying—the inner turmoil of a cardiac

patient."

After 21 days in the hospital, and surviving bouts of double pneumonia and a narrowing of her trachea, Amy was released. It took more than a year for her to start feeling like herself again.

Although her heart function is permanently compromised, she is working to build strength and stamina. In the past, Amy didn't consider it a workout unless she was drenched in sweat. But that's no longer possible. Nor are the competitive tennis matches with John Paul.

"It's been a hard adjustment," Amy said. "I had to shift my mentality a bit. It's about how much I can get done before my heart rate hits 160 bpm."

One day, Dave Sauls, the paramedic, received a Facebook message from John Paul.

Dave had heard Amy died. So, of course, he was "flabbergasted" by the message that said she was recovering at home.

"It was a gift from God in my life and something I needed at the time," he said. "I sat there and cried."

Since then, Dave and Amy have become close friends. He has trained many of her friends in CPR.

Eager to raise awareness about women's heart health in general and SCAD specifically, Amy has recorded local public service announcements and attended fundraising walks.

"I look at it as my responsibility to warn other women that this can happen to anybody," Amy said. "I didn't believe that it could happen to

me, and my stubbornness almost cost my kids their mother."

While it still stings that somebody else bought the home decor and art-making franchise that Amy wanted to buy into, she continues to make and sell her own pieces. She uses the name Heartwood, which her children suggested.

"This," she said, "is my therapy."

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