

# Two young moms bond over heart failure, transplant experiences

March 14 2019

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Heart transplant survivors Amanda Gabaldon (left) and Sarah Bradley. Photo courtesy: Sarah Bradley

Sarah Bradley's second pregnancy was uneventful until 30 weeks, when she found herself swollen, breathless and unusually fatigued.

When her chest and left side also began to hurt a few weeks later, the then-27-year-old from Roswell, New Mexico, went to the emergency room. Tests revealed she was in [heart failure](#).

Sarah was flown to a hospital in Albuquerque, where doctors discovered the underlying cause of her heart problem: Peripartum cardiomyopathy, a rare condition in which the heart becomes weakened and enlarged toward the end of pregnancy or within five months after delivery.

Doctors stabilized her condition and then induced labor a week later. Her son, Logan, was born five weeks early. While he went to the [neonatal intensive care unit](#), Sarah went to the cardiac ICU. She went home a few weeks later with medicine that was supposed to help strengthen her heart.

Instead, a fainting episode sent Sarah back to the hospital in Albuquerque. Tests showed her heart was functioning at 5 percent. She was sent to the Mayo Clinic in Phoenix, where she got a left ventricular assist device, or LVAD, to keep her heart pumping until a donor heart could be found.

Terrified, Sarah felt like no one understood what she was going through.

Amanda Gabaldon thought the same thing.

Amanda, then 29, had been diagnosed with the same condition a year earlier. Living in an Albuquerque suburb, she was recovering from a heart transplant when she saw a TV news story about Sarah. Amanda found Sarah on Facebook and sent her a message.

"I don't know you, but I'm here for you," Amanda wrote.

Sarah quickly replied, and the women soon began corresponding via phone calls, text and email. It would be another two years before Sarah got a new heart. The friendship provided an important outlet to share her fears, ask questions and find hope.

"She was the only one who I felt like knew what I was going through," Sarah said. "She was that shoulder I could lean on to talk about things no one else understood."

For Amanda, the friendship offered support and validation as she continued her recovery.

"Talking to someone who had the same issues helped me feel less alone," Amanda said.

Amanda's story started in November 2013, about a week after her daughter, Cassidy, was born.

Amanda began feeling short of breath. She was so fatigued that she couldn't lift her 6-pound baby. She had a cough and a gurgling in her chest. She sought treatment but was told it was probably a cold and her adjustment to becoming a new mom.

A month later, she went into cardiac arrest. Once revived, she was diagnosed with heart failure and peripartum cardiomyopathy. She received an LVAD in February 2014 and underwent a [heart transplant](#) that July.

It was a few months later that she connected with Sarah.

"Even though I met other women who had transplants, no one had the

same situation as me and Sarah, so we kind of adopted each other," Amanda said.

As she waited for a transplant, Sarah tried to find some normalcy through work until a [transient ischemic attack](#) or mini-stroke sent her back to the Mayo Clinic in Arizona. Now she had another problem: Her antibodies were extremely high, lowering her chances of finding a match for a new [heart](#).

By fall 2016, she was participating in a research trial when her mom was diagnosed with stage 4 stomach cancer. She opted to leave the trial to spend time with her mom. Meanwhile, her medical team worked to shift her care to a California hospital in hopes of tapping a larger donor pool.

In March 2017, she was accepted by the University of California, San Diego.

"I had already been on the list for two-and-a-half years," Sarah said. "All I could think was, 'When will it be my turn? I have two little boys who rely on me.'"

On Easter in 2017, she got the news she'd been waiting to hear. She underwent the transplant the next day. She returned home in June, just before her 29th birthday.

Sarah returned to work the following March. She's been adjusting back to normal activities with her two boys, Logan, now 4, and Caleb, 7.

"I had been sick for so long, I forgot what it felt like to be healthy," she said.

Despite the close relationship Sarah and Amanda developed, they didn't meet in person until last February. Amanda surprised Sarah by attending

the Albuquerque Go Red for Women luncheon.

With their health crises behind them, their conversations these days are mostly about everyday life.

"To be able to share my story and impact someone like Sarah, it meant the world to me," Amanda said. "It really showed me how much one person can impact another, and what it means to come together as a community."

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Citation: Two young moms bond over heart failure, transplant experiences (2019, March 14) retrieved 18 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-03-young-moms-bond-heart-failure.html>

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