

in a heartbeat

Close calls with a heart attack and stroke convinced a Texas woman to give up her high-stress life and create a network to help women reduce their risk of heart disease.

By Doug Donaldson



“No offense to my husband and son, but **my heart comes first.** If I’m not taking care of it, than I can’t take care of them.”

—Mellanie True Hills

Mellanie True Hills of Greenwood, Texas, has always lived a connected life. Early in her career she helped develop one of the world’s first corporate Web sites. A few years later, as a high-tech consultant for Cisco Systems, she was on call 24 hours a day via e-mail and cell phones. Her business schedule kept her hustling from city to city.

“Every day was like jumping from an airplane with my hair on fire,” Mellanie says. “I averaged four hours of sleep a night and traveled more than 200 days a year.”

In fact, she was stepping off a plane in San Jose when she got an abrupt message from her heart in the form of a subtle pain in her left shoulder and shortness of breath. Her computer bag felt heavier than normal.

Jolt of reality

“It had been raining a whole lot in San Jose and I dismissed the breathing problem as molds aggravating my allergies,” she says. “I did realize, though, that women

have more subtle signs of heart trouble than men. I was worried enough to see where the closest hospital was.”

Mellanie called her doctor in Austin and set up an appointment. At that appointment, her doctor ordered an electrocardiogram to measure her heart’s activity. When the doctor saw the results, she sent Mellanie straight to the hospital.

“I didn’t want to stay in the hospital. I had a lot to do,” she says. “April 15 was around the corner and taxes were due soon.”

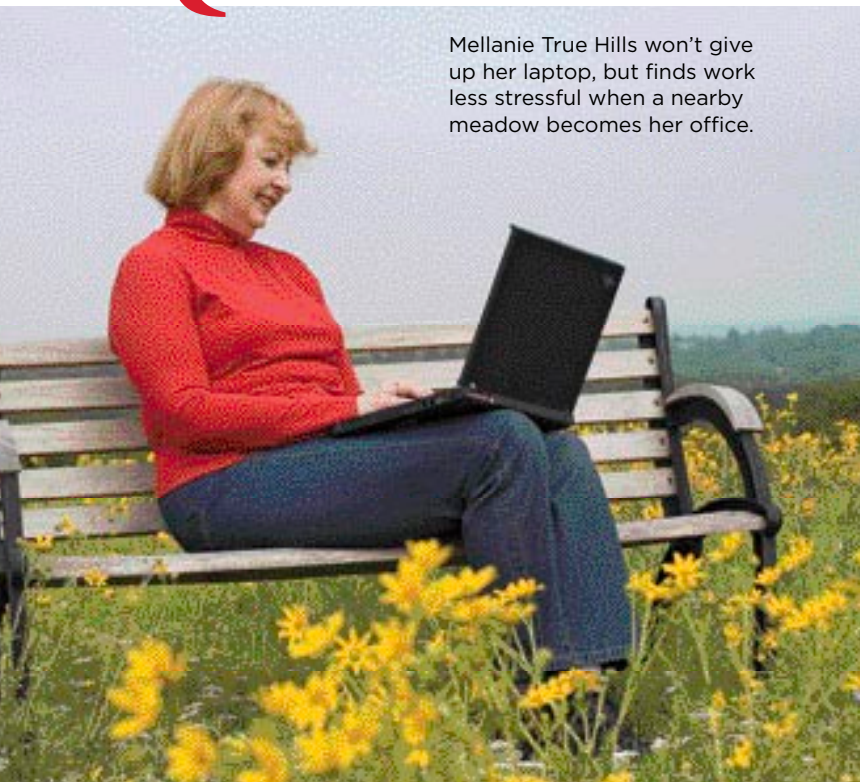
A Fluttering Heart

Atrial fibrillation, caused by misfiring of electrical signals through the heart, affects about 2.2 million Americans, according to the American Heart Association. While many people experience occasional heart fluttering, those with afib suffer an ongoing condition that cumulatively damages the heart, possibly even requiring a transplant. Visit Mellanie True Hills’ afib Web site, www.stopafib.org, for information.

“I believe most of us take our hearts for granted. No one calls attention to the heart until there’s something wrong. I have a second chance and I want to share that with other women.”

—Mellanie True Hills

Mellanie True Hills won't give up her laptop, but finds work less stressful when a nearby meadow becomes her office.



At the hospital, doctors discovered that one of Mellanie’s arteries was 95 percent blocked and that she was on the verge of a massive heart attack. Doctors performed surgery to clear the blockage and put in a stent—a tiny mesh tube—to keep the artery open.

“I had a second chance at life,” she says. Her third chance was yet to come.

Mixed signals

A few months later, she was in her home office plowing through e-mail when her heart skipped a few beats. She felt dizzy. “My right leg was cold, and the vision in my right eye was blurry,” she says.

Blood clots had lodged in her leg and behind her eye, bringing her dangerously close to suffering a stroke. The cause was atrial fibrillation, a disorder in which the heart flutters rapidly rather than beating steadily. Her heart disease made her susceptible to afib, which also can contribute to the formation of blood clots.

Mellanie’s doctor put her on the blood thinner Coumadin and banned air travel and simple chores like gardening because even small cuts could lead to excessive bleeding. Mellanie began investigating how to get her heart fixed.

“No offense to my husband and son, but my heart comes first,” Mellanie says. “If I’m not taking care of it, then I can’t take care of them. I need to be attuned to my heart.”

Her research led her to cardiothoracic surgeons Charles G. Reiter, M.D., and Erik A. Beyer, M.D., at the Scott & White Heart and Vascular Institute in Temple, Texas.

“Mellanie was at a higher risk of afib because of her earlier heart episode,” Beyer says. The doctors proposed an innovative surgery called a Minimaze. The relatively new procedure breaks up the erratic electrical signals that cause

Four Quick Diet Fixes

Making healthful changes in your diet is key to protecting your heart. Here are some hints from Mellanie True Hills.

- ♥ **Lighten up.** If you consume dairy products, aim for nonfat or low-fat products. Look for products that contain cholesterol-lowering plant sterols.
- ♥ **Swap out some sweets.** Mellanie makes brownies with fat-free yogurt instead of oil. She suggests making your own trail mix with walnuts, raisins, and other dried fruits.
- ♥ **Go with the grain.** Eat oat-based cereal, whole-grain pastas and breads, and sprinkle ground flaxseed over cereal, salads, casseroles, and into soups.
- ♥ **Snack healthfully.** Look for cereal bars low in fat (about 1.5 grams) and with about 120 calories each. They’re good to keep handy for emergency nibbling. Pretzel sticks are another good option. A dozen pretzel sticks typically contain only 1 gram of fat and 100 calories.



Mellanie devotes much of her time to raising awareness of heart issues among women, participating in events sponsored by the American Heart Association, *left* and *below*, and lobbying elected officials, *below left*.

the abnormal heartbeats. The surgery is performed through small incisions between the ribs, allowing the surgeon to have access to the heart without cracking the rib cage. The heart continues to beat during the procedure, reducing the chance of complications.

Complete in about three hours, a Minimaze is less invasive than other forms of afib surgery, which means patients recover more quickly.

"When I do this procedure, it's not uncommon to see the heart immediately resume normal beating," says Beyer, a surgeon for more than 12 years.

"After the procedure, I felt my heart shift gears," Mellanie says. "There was a huge difference. Now I can walk back onto a plane. It restored my freedom."

Encouraging others

Since her first surgery, Mellanie has taken charge of her health through lifestyle changes. She began eating more healthfully and exercising more, including daily walks on her ranch, and has lost about 85 pounds. Mellanie also has created the American Foundation for Women's Health and Web sites—www.americanwomenshealth.org and www.stopafib.org—that help fulfill her mission of advocating for women to take charge of their own health and read their heart signals. **HHL**



Be Alert to These Symptoms

When cruising down the information highway, it's hard to hear your own heart—especially when you have a phone in one hand, Blackberry in another, laptop slung over your shoulder, and a plane to catch. Mellanie True Hills lived that heart-silent life as an always-on-the-go computer executive. Some heart scares caused her to exit the fast lane. She has switched to a slower gear, but maintains her intensity to motivate women to connect with their hearts.

"Women typically don't have the same symptoms as men," says Mellanie, author of *A Woman's Guide to Saving Her Own Life*. "To help women remember what symptoms to look out for, I ask them to remember the L.I.F.E. acronym."

L—LEFT. Pains that are located more on the left side may indicate potential heart problems, even pains in the back and jaw in addition to the traditional arm or shoulder.

I—INDIGESTION. The kind of indigestion or nausea associated with potential heart problems tends to be more severe than what you'd feel after a spicy meal.

F—FATIGUE. In addition to feeling tired, Mellanie also says to look for sleeplessness, which may also signal heart distress.

E—EXERTION. Shortness of breath more severe than normal and under conditions when you wouldn't normally be out of breath may be indications of heart trouble.