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Rome Memorial Hospital director of surgical services shares his heart story as American Heart Association Red Cap Ambassador

As director of surgical services at Rome Memorial Hospital, Russell Arant is very familiar with the clinical and financial management of an operating room. After the unexpected discovery of a faulty heart valve during a routine physical in September of 2010 however, Arant found himself looking at the workings of an operating room from a completely different point of view. Now it is with heartfelt sincerity that he is sharing his experience with others as an American Heart Association Red Cap Ambassador for the America's Greatest Heart Run and Walk.

In addition to his ambassadorship, Arant will also work to help the American Heart Association through a special gift he received from his wife this past Christmas. Following his successful heart valve replacement surgery, LeRyiah Arant dubbed her husband "The Tin Man," as in the Wizard of Oz character who sought a heart. Unbeknownst to Arant, last year LeRyiah started a team in his honor for the America's Greatest Heart Run and Walk, which benefits the heart association. She recruited friends to join in the walk and to begin raising funds. LeRyiah surprised her husband with "Team Tin Man" at Christmas. Arant said that the team has already raised over \$1,000 and are the fourth highest fund raising team so far for this year's event. They will join with "Team RMH" from Rome Memorial Hospital in raising funds for the event.

This year the annual American Heart Association's fund raising event kicks off with the Rome Indoor Run/Walk and pre-registration, from 8:30 a.m. to noon, Saturday, Feb. 4 on the indoor track at Rome Free Academy.



RED CAP AMBASSADOR – Russell Arant enjoys some time with his family, from left: his daughter, Ruby, 3; Russell Arant; his son, Navy, 1 1/2 ; and his wife, LeRyiah.

America's Greatest Heart Run and Walk will be held from 6 a.m. to 1 p.m., Saturday, March 3, beginning on the Utica College campus.

A very active and health conscious individual, Arant said he had no idea there was anything wrong with him until he went for a routine physical in September of 2010. "My doctor said I was the healthiest patient he had ever had," Arant explained. That is until the physician heard something unusual when listening to Arant's heart during that fall check-up.

After hearing the heart murmur, Arant's doctor thought it best to order an echocardiogram be performed that same day.

"I was surprised when he called me later with the results," Arant said. "I thought 'what great service.'" But the news was not good. The doctor told Arant that a heart valve defect, which he had had since birth, was allowing blood to flow back into his heart. When the heart would beat and push blood out, the malfunctioning valve would allow blood to flow the wrong way back into his resting heart between beats. After all the years of this occurring, Arant's heart had become enlarged. But the worst news was that an aneurysm had formed in his aorta just above his heart. Normally the aorta has a circumference equal to that of a quarter, but Arant's had bulged to more than twice that size in one area and was in immediate danger of rupture.

"It was just a matter of time until it would have popped," Arant said, "and I would have been a dead man in less than a minute. There would have been absolutely no time to react or get treatment for something like that." He was 35 years old when he received this very scary news.

"It is important to understand that I was completely a-symptomatic," Arant said. "A lot of people don't go in for routine physicals. If I hadn't gone to the doctor I would not have known there was a problem until it was too late."

Once the diagnosis was confirmed by an emergency CAT scan the same night as his physical, Arant said he and his wife began to look into where he should seek treatment to fix his heart.

"We never had a pity party. We never fell into that victim mentality. We never gave up," Arant said.

"Reality smacked us in the face, but we understood that treatment for this condition was available but we needed to act quickly."

The kind of cardiac surgery that Arant needed is only performed at a limited number of healthcare facilities nationwide. Arant and his family had to travel to Ohio for the procedure.

Less than a month after his heart problems were diagnosed, Arant was wheeled into surgery on October 13, 2010. There doctors replaced his faulty heart valve with a mechanical one. "It is made of black diamond," Arant said with a smile. "It is really expensive, but they said it should last a lifetime." Arant's damaged aorta was also replaced with a three inch piece of synthetic pipe.

Arant had been involved in many physical activities prior to his diagnosis, including motorcycle and mountain bike racing in addition to distance running and cycling. He had participated in a local triathlon just two weeks prior to his diagnosis.

"I viewed surgery as stepping up to the starting line in a race," Arant said. "I was excited to get started. I went into the surgery with the best of spirits. I was fortunate that I had a problem that could be fixed." The surgery went well and a subsequent surgery a few days later, to remove fluid that had accumulated around his heart, also was uncomplicated. Then Arant said the hard part started for him... the recovery. After a three week stay in the hospital, Arant and his family were able to return home. Once at home, however, Arant found that he wasn't prepared for the limitations of his recovery period.

"I couldn't pick up anything that weighed more than 10 pounds. I couldn't pick up my kids, take out the trash... I couldn't be the contributing member of my family that I was before." Arant said this was the most emotionally draining period for him, but he pushed through it. He attended cardiac rehabilitation for five weeks, and by keeping a positive attitude and following his recovery plan he was back to work just two months after surgery.

“I need to take care of my health,” Arant said of his post operative lifestyle, but this was something he really already did. His day to day life hasn’t really changed much, other than, “I have to take a blood thinner, Coumadin, every day and I have to have my blood checked once a week.”

Because of the blood thinner, Arant did have to give up on motorcycle and mountain bike racing. What he once might have considered a minor injury could be very serious now because he bleeds more easily. Other than that, he now has no physical limitations due to his heart procedure.

For years the American Heart Association has promoted and funded research and development of procedures like the one that saved Arant’s life. Now healthy and happily able to pick up his three-year-old daughter, Ruby, and 18 month old son, Navy, Arant considers it a great honor to represent the success of this group’s support as a Red Cap Ambassador.

“If my story can help someone else, can motivate someone to pay attention to their health, that is really important to me,” Arant said. “I truly feel that God chose me to be this person to have to deal with this, to push through it and to bring this positive message to other people.”