Mary Wenclawski, Illinois Survivor

Mary Wenclawski is diligent in monitoring her health, so when she started to feel mild chest discomfort two years ago, she reported it to her doctor. She was referred to a cardiologist for testing, but no blockage or other problems were detected.

Mary’s primary care physician suspected acid reflux and prescribed medication to treat it. When the chest pains continued, she was told to double the dosage.

“Nothing could have prepared me for the events of just a few months later,” said Mary. She was playing a rigorous match on the far court at her local tennis club when she suffered sudden cardiac arrest. “I remember going for a shot and then nothing.”

Her partner and opponents rushed to see what was wrong. One called 9-1-1 for help and another, thinking she might be choking, tried the Heimlich maneuver.

The owner of the tennis club grabbed the club’s automated external defibrillator (AED) and rushed over to her. The shock he administered restored her heart’s rhythm and saved her life.

The paramedics transported Mary to the hospital, where she received two stents to reopen blocked coronary arteries. But three months later, the familiar chest discomfort returned and Mary sought immediate medical help.

The doctors found another blockage and scheduled cardiac bypass surgery. After a successful surgery and months of cardiac rehabilitation, Mary was able to resume her normal activities, including a regular tennis game. Mary is now an active volunteer with the American Heart Association in Metro Chicago, participating in Advocacy and Go Red for Women campaigns.

Because of women like Mary, the American Heart Association and its volunteers are advocating for more research, education and screening to help prevent and cure heart disease and stroke, the No. 1 and No. 4 killers of women in Illinois and the United States.