

## 'A Short Circuit of the Heart'

Story #3 in 'Protecting Oakley Families—Residents Thank the First Responders of the East Contra Costa County Fire Protection District'

by Karla Patterson as told to Barbara Santos (925) 420-6223 [writepr@gmail.com](mailto:writepr@gmail.com)



The Patterson Family from left to right:  
KC, Hugh (husband), Hugh II (son),  
Amanda, and Karla Patterson

People with SVT (Super Ventricular Tachycardia) never know when an episode is going to hit. Karla Patterson had dealt with it off and on since she was 18, but it took an emergency encounter with a first responder to understand exactly what was causing her heart to beat uncontrollably.

For years Karla believed they were just anxiety attacks and blamed herself. "Maybe my heart was racing out of control because I was overweight, out of shape, and on lots of medications. In any case, I could deal with them when they'd come every five or ten years." But in 2011 when she was 44, Karla started having the attacks more frequently. In a twelve-month period, she had eight episodes. And that's where the first responders come into the story.

A normal heart beats between 60 to 100 times a minute, but during these mysterious episodes, Karla's heart rate would jump from 90 to 140 in two beats. During her worst episodes, her heart was pounding dangerously at 220 beats a minute. "When you are having episodes like I had, your mind is racing about as fast as your heart. It is terrifying," Karla remembers.

If Karla was having an attack at home, the firefighters and paramedics from Station 93 on O'Hara in Oakley would arrive first since she lived right down the street from the station. "The firefighters were so reassuring even when it was in the middle of the night, especially to my kids who were 7, 11, and 13. They always explained to my kids what they were doing for me." One night, while her daughters were having friends over for a

sleepover, Karla had an attack. "I heard my older daughter explain to her friends that the fire department was coming and there was nothing to be afraid of. My kids knew the drill and I think that's because the firefighters were always so calm with them."

After the first three visits to her house, one of the first responders suggested that Karla talk to her doctor about a condition called SVT (Super Ventricular Tachycardia). "The firefighters and paramedics were the ones who saw my heart racing since by the time I got to the ER in the ambulance, my heart rate would be coming back down. After I mentioned what the first responder had told me to my doctor, I was diagnosed with SVT. It is basically a short circuit in the heart."

Karla had a couple more episodes at home even though she was now on medication to keep them from happening. But her worst episode ever was still to come. "I was driving my daughter home from church. I yawned and as I came out of the yawn I was in SVT. So I made a U-turn, pulled over on Sand Creek and called 911. By this episode I knew what to tell them. I was in SVT and I knew it was a bad one."

Karla told them she was only two minutes away from church...and she'd meet the first responders there!

“I felt comfortable enough to drive since I had never passed out from these episodes. I actually beat them to the church, but once I was in the back of the ambulance and hooked up I was told that my heart was in distress and tacking at 220.”

The IV and oxygen were not working to bring her heart rate down. A paramedic gave Karla a medication through an IV that would stop her heart for a split second to break the cycle and help get her heart to slow down. He explained that the effects of the medication would be uncomfortable and she'd probably have a pain in her chest. Karla remembers it was much worse. “It felt like my body was turning inside-out. I told him that I NEVER wanted to go through that again.” But the first dose didn't work. Her heart rate was still at 220 after nearly 30 minutes. Not good. “He said that he'd have to give me a second dose—the last dose in the rig. If it didn't work they'd have to actually shock my heart.” Again, Karla's body felt like it wanted to turn inside-out. Waiting, waiting, waiting. YES! It worked. They could finally transport her to the ER.

“On the way to Kaiser Sand Creek, the paramedic talked to me about a procedure called a cardiac ablation and explained how it worked. That was January 2012. I had to think about having my heart worked on but after a couple more episodes I ended up having it fixed in June 2012.”

“I thank our local first responders (our firefighters, our paramedics and EMTs) for helping me get my life back. About a year after my procedure I finally realized how much the SVT had taken over my life. Now my heart is healthy and strong and, due to the procedure and 100+lb weight loss and exercise, my heart is beating normally and I'm off all my meds except one. My heart sometimes still wants to go into SVT but it can't, the bridge has been broken. Each of those firefighters, paramedics and EMTs have a special place in my heart—my fixed heart.”

Thank you,  
Karla Patterson  
Oakley Resident