



Valerie Azlynn: Tales From the Heart

By Barbie Brady

Actress Valerie Azlynn is no stranger to the complex and emotional journey that starts the moment you discover you have some form of congenital heart disease (CHD). Valerie was 11 years old and starting a new school. Her family pediatrician thought he heard something amiss while giving her a regular physical. He sent her off to have further tests, which eventually led to a visit to a cardiologist and the diagnosis of atrial septic defect (ASD).

“The way I was diagnosed was intense,” said Valerie. “When they told me I had a hole in my heart, it was clear something would need to be done, but at the time they were experimenting with a new patch procedure and they opted to put me on a wait list for that. For the next two years, that’s all I could do. I waited.”

This was before the advent of the Internet in every home. Eleven year-old Valerie did all the research that she could at the local library. She didn’t know any other children going through the same thing, which led to her feeling isolated and alone. The resources for understanding her condition and coping with the stress of major surgery were all but non-existent in the area.

On December 1, 1993, they got the life-changing call from her cardiologist. She was not a good candidate for the patch surgery, a less-invasive procedure, because she had hit puberty and had a growth spurt that put extra strain on her heart. She would have to have open heart surgery in the very near future. The arrangements were made and in early March she was checked into the hospital. On March 4, her successful open heart

surgery was performed — and it changed her life and her appearance forever.

“Every year my Mother and I, and now my husband, celebrate my ‘heartiversary,’” Valerie explained. “We treat it just like a birthday. Last year marked the 20th anniversary and I came home to a house full of heart balloons and a celebration of gratitude for a healthy life.”

At 13 Valerie was finally on the mend. She remembers seeing her scar for the first time and being generally shocked at how severe it was. She took every opportunity to hide it. Including an exhaustive search for an 8th grade graduation dress that ended with “the potato sack dress.” This dowdy brown dress was unflattering, but the only high-necked garment they could find.

Following her passion for acting and singing, at 17 Valerie moved to New York City to attend acting school. In the city she felt like it was more acceptable to be different, but career-wise, she always played it pretty close to the vest. She would wear high-neck blouses or large necklaces to disguise the scar for auditions. The competitive nature of acting means those hiring you have to see what they are looking for in the role, and Valerie’s fear of calling attention to the scar was always in the back of her mind.





All photos by Dustin Downing
Valerie's hair by Lauryn Tullio

Valerie stays fit with trainer Jeff Paugh at Chain Fitness.



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Valerie was never afraid of the audition as much as she was the call once she got the part. When wardrobe would request her measurements, she always had to add the bit about having a pretty large chest scar that they would have to work around. She remembers one time in particular when she overheard that the production opted to retouch all of her scenes at great expense just to erase the scar.

“It’s not the easiest thing to deal with in an industry full of seemingly perfect girls and unrealistic expectations,” she said. Just a few years ago, when a magazine did an article on Valerie that focused on her open-heart story, they actually photoshopped every photo in the spread to erase the scar.

That’s why Valerie’s work as the National Spokesperson for Mended Little Hearts is so important to her, as well as rewarding: “I wanted to be the one to stand up and say that it’s important to be who you are and not keep covering up.”

In 2014 MLH launched its first Rock Your Scar campaign to overwhelming success. This contest is not only an opportunity for the participants to win prizes, but also a chance to show off their bravery and enjoy a boost to their self-esteem. It’s so important for kids, especially, to have a community of support around them. In this day and age it’s

much easier to rally people far and wide to be proud of who they are and what they have come through, whether it brings physical or emotional scars. Everybody is encouraged to rock his or her attitude and raise awareness for such an important and impactful disease.

For Valerie, her turning point happened not too many years ago when she got the role of Melanie Sutton on the TBS sitcom *Sullivan and Son*. Executive Producer Peter Billingsley told Valerie to show off her scar. He encouraged her to never feel ashamed of it, as it’s the thing that helps her stand apart. She very much took that encouragement to heart.

“Now when I walk a red carpet or show up for an event I do everything I can to show off my scar. I encourage people to ask about it and try to spread the word about CHDs and the Rock Your Scar campaign. It’s now a source of great pride,” she said.

Join Valerie in the 2015 Rock Your Scar contest. “It’s not just for yourself but for the inspirational image you may be sharing that might change someone else’s life or brighten their day,” Valerie said. ❤️