



## *Rachelle's story—in her own words*

I'm Rachelle Ann Rosales - Rivera, 32 years old from Cavite. I was born with a heart defect called patent ductus arteriosus (PDA). I have been struggling my whole life because of this condition.

My mother gave birth to me in our home in Legazpi City Albay with the aid of the local midwife (manghihilot). My parents thought I had dark skin like my father because I looked dark when I was born but my skin eventually got lighter. They realized later on that I was a blue baby.

I was weak and sickly as a baby; I had constant fever, cough and colds. Due to poverty and lack of knowledge in the province during that time, my parents brought me to different faith healers but I didn't get better. Eventually, they brought me to a doctor who informed them that I might have a heart condition. I was referred to the Philippine Heart Center .



My parents struggled financially. I was one year old when I was finally brought in Manila for consultation. The Philippine Heart Center confirmed that I had congenital heart disease and subject to operation. My parents immediately asked for financial aid from the PCSO (Philippine Charity Sweepstakes Office) and other agencies for the operation. It wasn't easy. We could barely afford to travel back and forth. My mother and I experienced sleeping outside the hospital because we didn't have enough bus money to go home the next day.

The necessary documents were successfully completed. Another year passed by and I was not operated because there was no available bed in Philippine Heart Center.

I had to continue living with my heart condition. I tried very hard to live like a normal child. But there were lots of limitations. I was not allowed to do physical activities because I easily got exhausted. I couldn't play with the other kids because they were always worried that I might suddenly collapse. At school, I couldn't even lift my own bag. I clearly remember that whenever I wore my identification card, I could see it jump thru my chest because of the palpitations. When I was in fourth grade, I was forced to stop attending classes because I was hospitalized for a month.

The doctor told my family to give me everything I want because I won't be living for a long time. I thought that was the end of my story but that didn't stop me. I went back to school, finished my primary and secondary education despite all the struggles.

### *Rachelle with Dr. Jonas*

Teaching had always been my passion. I was still in high school when I worked as a part time tutor of our neighbor so I'll have extra allowance.

I informed my family that for college, I want to take up Education. I was so excited but everyone was against it. I kept on crying because I felt like no one was willing to support my dream. They were worried that being a teacher would be too difficult and my fragile body would not be able to take all the pressure.

When I was finally able to convince my family, I started the enrollment process. I had to undergo a physical exam. My x-ray showed an enlarged heart. I was required to seek medical clearance to determine if I was fit to attend the university. I cried so hard. I was frustrated that my condition was still a barrier in reaching my dream.

I convinced the doctor that I was capable and could manage my condition. I was so happy when I was finally allowed to enroll in the university. I enjoyed being a college student but during the second year, I always had chest pains. I was in the university clinic almost every day. Again, I was forced to stop my studies.

I experienced going to the Philippine General Hospital (PGH) alone. I could barely afford the transportation cost. I went for checkups without anyone with me. I was able to process the documents, I was given the quotation for the operation. But again, our family couldn't afford it.

After a year, I went back to the university. I finished the required courses and demo teaching. My burning passion in teaching was able to conquer my physical limitations. In 2015, I finished my bachelor's degree in Secondary Education Major in Filipino in Rizal Technological University Boni, Mandaluyong. I immediately took the Licensure Exam for Teachers and passed. My family was so happy and proud that I was able to achieve my dream despite my heart condition.

In 2016, I was hired as a teacher in a small private school in Cavite then the following year, I was hired at the University of Perpetual Help Molino Campus. I enjoyed being a teacher of the Grade 11 and 12 students. My efforts were appreciated by the principal. It was the peak of my career, and I was happy. Unfortunately, my fragile body couldn't cope with all the physical and mental stress. I realized that I could no longer force my body and had to stay at home.

In March 2022, I got married to Roldan Rivera. It was surreal, I couldn't believe that someone would accept me as a wife on account of my heart condition. In the past, I experienced being discriminated against by the mother of my ex-boyfriend. She told his son to break up with me because I was not good enough for his son. Since I was younger, doctors always remind me that I was not allowed to have children. Another limitation of my condition. Years passed by and my condition got the best of me. I stopped visiting the doctors because I could no longer afford it and I got tired of taking nine medicines in a day.

In August 2022, I felt that my condition was getting worse, but I didn't want to go to a hospital because I knew that it will cost a lot of money. For almost a week, I had difficulty in breathing even when I was not doing anything. I just felt so helpless. Roldan, my husband, was crying with me because he didn't know how to help me. He used to be a bagger in a supermarket. In order to improve our life, he took a vocational course in Tesda. He is currently working as a mechanic but only earning the minimum wage.

In January 2023, I joined the Heart Warriors Facebook group. It was a supportive community for people like me. I saw several posts thanking Doctor Jonas del Rosario for his successful heart operations. Last April 10, Doc Jonas had a Facebook post stating that he was looking for adults and children who may benefit from Catheter device closure. I immediately sent him a private message. To my surprise, he replied and scheduled me for a checkup. I was hesitant because we didn't have enough money for the consultation fee.

The next day, my husband and I went to Philippine Children's Hospital without much money in our pockets. We were in awe with Doc Jonas' hospitality and kindness. He talked to us warmly and encouraged us to have the procedure after a week. Last April 28, 2023, I was successfully operated. I couldn't believe it, after 32 years of living with PDA, and all the hardships, my heart is finally fixed. I am beyond grateful to God, Doc Jonas, Operation Braveheart, my supportive husband, family, friends and everyone who made this possible. I am a living testament that everything will be okay in God's time. We just have to keep the faith and believe in Him.

Matthew 19:26 WITH GOD ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE

It has been five months since my heart surgery. Here are the changes so far as per my last last check up last July 18, my heart has decreased in size, My blood pressure is now 120/80, before it was usually 140/60, I can now climb the stairs up to the second floor without losing my breath. I can now breath normally while laying down on my back, it used to be a hard position for me to sleep on. My lips are no longer purplish (more on pinkish now). I'm no longer coughing every night. My immune system improved a lot, I used to have colds easily. I'm very thankful that I feel more "normal" now because my heart has been fixed. I'm now teaching several kids at home (as a private tutor).



*Rachelle with husband Roldan*