

# The Other Side of the Stethoscope

## *Nightingale Honoree Pat Srenaski Opens Heart to Cardiac Surgery Patients*

By Joy Savulak, VNA Health Care

Pat Srenaski, RN, BSN is known as a versatile nurse, able to adapt to any role with ease and grace. Throughout her career she's been a visiting nurse, a clinical supervisor and currently works as an occupational health nurse with the Hartford-based home care agency VNA Health Care.

But when the Nightingale honoree learned that she was living with a potentially fatal aortic aneurysm, she suddenly found herself on the other side of the stethoscope. Srenaski was about to become an open heart surgery patient.

"It was a very scary time in my life," she said. "Nothing in my training prepared me for the fear you face with open heart surgery. It didn't matter that I was a nurse. You're scared, period."

Anxious, overwhelmed and understanding little of the road ahead of her, Srenaski sought solace and information from her friend and VNA Health Care colleague, Mary Jane Bernabe. A cardiac home care nurse and fellow 2006 Nightingale Award winner, Bernabe answered Srenaski's questions and explained each step of the typical recovery process. After three major surgeries and a month in the hospital, Srenaski returned home with Bernabe serving not only as her visiting nurse, but also as her guiding light.

"Mary Jane's support was incredible," Srenaski explained.

"Even though I was a nurse, I still needed someone to reassure me that I'd be fine; that everything I was going through was normal. Until you experience it for yourself, you have no clue what it's like. As I recovered, I realized that I needed to do for others what Mary Jane did for me."

During her three month cardiac rehabilitation program at Waterbury Hospital, the staff observed how easily Srenaski engaged other rehab patients in open conversation about their concerns. Impressed, they asked her to join the hospital's Healthy Hearts Volunteer Visitation Program, a support group of former cardiac patients who make visits to patients currently undergoing cardiac treatment in the hospital.

Three years later and fully recovered, Srenaski brings new meaning to the term visiting nurse. She is frequently found visiting up to four patients in a single evening on her mission to correct misperceptions, allay fears, and sow hope.

"She has a remarkable gift of relating to the patients and getting them to honestly open up to her as a peer," said Denise Konnik, RN, manager of the Healthy Hearts program.

Konnik recalls an instance when Srenaski was called in to visit a woman in her 90's who had given up her will to live following aortic valve replacement surgery.

"She said that at 92, she was too weak to fight anymore and had given up on life. But with Pat's encouragement, she started eating and drinking a little more each day and eventually was strong enough to be discharged," Konnik explained.

"It's all about just being able to say, listen, I've been in that bed just like you. I was so scared and I know that you are scared, too. But look at me now...I have a productive life and so will you. Yes, it's going to be a long, hard road to recovery, but you'll get there," Srenaski said.

Srenaski explained that volunteering for the Healthy Hearts program has been a gratifying end to what was a traumatic period in her life.

"I faced death – but I conquered it. I feel strongly that I am still on this earth to fulfill some purpose...maybe this is it."

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