



The heart of a champion

By Jen Todd
The Tennessean

Before swimmer Dana Vollmer became an Olympic gold medalist, she had a different battle to conquer.

And it wasn't another team or athlete challenging her, it was her heart.

"At 15, I didn't know how to process someone telling me I wouldn't be able to swim again," she said. "It felt unreal."

Vollmer was diagnosed with long QT Syndrome, a congenital disorder that affects the heart's electrical system. Her heart could stop at any moment, and without immediate CPR, she could die.

"I had always been told, as long as you work hard you can reach it," she said. At that moment, her dream came to "a screeching halt."

But as the world saw in the Olympic games in Athens in 2004 and London in 2012, Vollmer wasn't going to give up without a fight. She has four gold medals and a world record

to prove it.

Vollmer will be in Nashville April 12 to speak about her experience and promote heart health during the Go Red for Women Luncheon.

After the diagnosis and more tests, doctors told her she could continue to compete, as long as she had a defibrillator — which sends electrical energy to the heart — nearby at all times.

"My mom then made the hard decision to let me keep swimming," she said. "She would carry the defibrillator to every workout and class."

Vollmer also had to be more cautious while in the pool.

"I was always good about blocking anything out when I was racing," she said. "Swimming is about training underwater and breath control. I always had this fear that if I felt dizzy or anything it wasn't normal — it was something to do with long QT."

After a visit last fall to the Texas Heart Institute, Vollmer also realized the importance of heart research.

"They did two full days of every test under the sun," she said. "They didn't see any signs

of long QT syndrome. They're looking back trying to see what could have shown those signs. It just shows how much more research we need."

The discovery gave Vollmer a new perspective.

"On one hand I thought, 'Did my mom and I go through all that fear and anxiety for nothing?'" she said. "But it also makes me passionate for helping spread awareness" about heart disease.

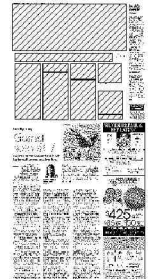
Vollmer helps spread the word as an ambassador for the American Heart Association.

"AHA has made such a big push that (heart disease) is not just an old man's disease," she said, "that it affects women, as well, and how much it affects kids.

"I heard a statistic that really stuck with me. One student athlete dies every two weeks in the U.S. Most of the time it was a preventable heart disease."

Vollmer, a country music fan, is looking forward to her visit to Music City for the Go Red for Women Luncheon.

"I'm really excited to walk around downtown and be in the atmosphere," she said. "And if I



happen to run into Carrie Underwood, that would make my day.”

IF YOU GO

What: Go Red for Women Luncheon and workshops

When: 9 a.m.-1 p.m. April 12

Where: Gaylord Opryland Hotel and Convention Center, 2800 Opryland Drive

Tickets: \$250

Contact:

www.heart.org/nashvillegored,
615-340-4115