



Rebecca Burch and Reba Nobles

How two sisters overcame fear together

Sisters in their 80s have their heart procedures back-to-back, just part of their lifelong bond

Rebecca Burch and Reba Nobles live only two doors down from each other in Lexington, North Carolina, and the sisters, now in their 80s, still do just about everything together: Church. Friday hair appointments. Tending their vegetable gardens each morning.

So it just seemed natural to have their heart surgeries together, too.

Burch, 88, said she now owes her life in part to that tight sibling connection. Her cardiologist had been trying to talk her into getting a heart procedure, but she was afraid. That changed when 85-year-old Nobles gave into her cardiologist after three years of lobbying and agreed to have the same procedure herself...on one condition. Her older sister with the same affliction, severe aortic stenosis, would have to go ahead of her.

“She just wouldn’t go first,” said Burch with a laugh. “I said, well, the reason she wanted me

to go first was because if I died, she wouldn’t have the operation.”

Nobles smiled. “Now, Beck...,” she said.

The procedure, transcatheter aortic valve replacement, is more commonly referred to as TAVR, or sometimes TAVI. It’s a relatively new, nonsurgical treatment where a wire mesh valve is inserted into the heart through an artery in the leg. Novant Health offers two approaches to TAVR—through a small incision in the groin (which was what both sisters opted for) or sometimes through a small incision in the chest.

TAVR is considered less risky for patients compared to open-heart surgery because it’s minimally invasive.

In open-heart surgery, surgeons must open the chest, separate the breastbone, stop the heart, take the old valve out, put a new valve in and allow for lots of recovery time. A TAVR procedure is done in about an hour by wedging a replacement valve into the existing valve’s place without having to remove the existing valve.

“My cardiologist said, you better do something because my heart was closing up more and more. When I went in one day, I thought, well, I’ll just tell him I’ll have it,” Nobles said. “When I told him I’d do it, boy, he took off and got me signed up.”

Only a few weeks after their surgeries in June, both sisters were cutting up in Burch’s living room with one another about life and how neither of them has missed a beat.

They don’t actually sit that much, though. Both still drive, and Nobles keeps an old truck out back for when they need to haul garden weeds and garbage to the landfill. The pair plan to continue making their regular drives down to South Carolina to see their “little” sister Martha Lou. They also have another sister, Mary, who lives in Lexington. That’s four out of 11 kids still living.

“Both sisters had a critical blockage in the aortic valve,” said Dr. Sam Turner, who was a surgeon with the team at Novant Health Forsyth Medical Center that performed the two procedures back-to-back. “They both had exertional shortness of breath and fatigue that they both attributed to old age but was really their aortic valve not allowing blood to get out to the rest of the body.”

Burch wouldn’t mince words when she talked about her early hesitations. “I was afraid I was going to die,” she said. “But if you have the one they gave us you can get over it. We went

in on Tuesday, came out of Friday and they told us to go back to what you were doing before.

“I guess Turner and that one over there (Nobles) talked me into having it done. Dr. Turner’s such an easy person to talk to and he’s good looking.”

Turner said there are some risks associated with the new procedure, including heart attack, stroke and death, but said it’s less risky than what was available before. “This procedure has been shown to have a decreased risk of major adverse effects compared to open-heart surgery,” he said.

In the first two weeks after surgery, Burch’s daughter, Sheila, was over keeping an eye on her mother. They both took daytime naps and one day Sheila woke up to find her mother outside working the soil with a garden hoe. Nobles was no different. She insisted on being outside frying fish for a fish fry, only days after coming home.

“We do what we want to do,” Reba said.

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The sisters grew up working on a tobacco farm in the eastern part of the state and have lived the quintessential “North Carolina” experience. Aside from living in the barbecue-crazed Lexington area, they also each worked for decades at Thomasville Furniture. Nobles drove a forklift while Burch hand-decorated furniture. Burch’s living room is filled with items that she painted through the years.

The sisters have had a little extra motivation to try to get on with their lives. Their father died at 54 of an apparent heart attack, leaving their mother and the seven kids still living at home to keep the farm going. Their mother lived to 99 and one grandmother reached 107. So they knew there was a chance they could enjoy some more good years by taking care of their bodies.

“They did an excellent job,” Turner said. “They were up the next day walking and home shortly thereafter. They’re just great people, full of energy, full of life. I have two daughters and I hope that if my daughters live to be 88 and 85 they’ll be as good of friends as these two ladies are.”

Burch and Nobles still cook Sunday family dinners, too. “That’s the chicken and dumping queen there,” Rebecca will say, pointing at Reba.

And the surgeries this summer didn’t diminish their gardens a bit. Anyone who stops by should be prepared to leave with some fresh tomatoes.

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