



lowcountry parent & family life

Getting to Know ... Jennifer Peura, MD

BY RYAN NELSON

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LeAnn Cannon

The Peura family.

It's the No. 1 killer of women – heart disease. But one local physician and mom of two is trying to change that statistic one heart at a time. As the medical director of Ventricular Assist Device Program and assistant professor of Medicine/Cardiology at the Medical University of South Carolina, Dr. Jennifer Peura, 37, works tirelessly to help families with severe heart disease from around the state. With two active sons, 18-month-old Kyle and 3-year-old Zachary, she understands the beauty of life and how it can change in an instant.

Q: You're originally from Illinois. When did you arrive in the Lowcountry?

A: My husband, Brian, and I moved to Charleston in 2000 as newlyweds. I had graduated from medical school and my husband business school. He was recruited for a job, and I followed him.

Q: What made you specialize in cardiology?

A: As a medical student, I was assigned to tag along with a cardiologist. While in clinic he received a call from the emergency room about a patient with chest pain. He sent me ahead of him to check it out. Pulling the list of questions to ask out of my lab coat pocket I did my best to assess the patient. I called him to report the chest pressure, shortness of breath and jaw pain. He asked me what I thought. I told him I was worried about a heart attack. He said "Me too, meet you in the cath lab" (catheterization laboratory is an examination room in a hospital with diagnostic imaging equipment used to support the catheterization procedure). Based on my opinion, they whisked this patient to the cath lab. Before I knew it I was standing there with sterile gloves on and a bird's eye view of the artery being opened. I was in awe. Minutes before he was having a heart attack, and now he was fixed. I later learned that this patient was from a small town near where I grew up. I was so exhilarated and moved. It just felt like my destiny. I was hooked.

Q: What's the misconception of what you do?

A: Most people think I am a surgeon. As a heart transplant and ventricular assist device cardiologist, I take care of patients with severe heart disease. I work closely with the surgeons who implant our devices and perform the transplants. I work in the hospital taking care of critical patients and am responsible for stabilizing them for surgery. After they recover, I am responsible to get them back on their feet.

Q: How do you explain to Zachary and Kyle what you do?

A: I tell them that I take care of "the sick people." Sometimes my 3-year-old will ask on a Saturday when I am home "Are the people feeling better today Mommy?" He beams when I tell him yes.

Q: You have a very hectic schedule. What's the hardest and best part about being a mom?

A: The hardest part is the worry that all of their needs are met. They didn't sign up to be the sons of a physician, yet their lives will be influenced by that fact. I hope for the better. I do love the process of passing time by the growth and development of a child. Before children, the years seemed to pass so fast. For Kyle, each month brings new wonders. For Zachary, our time with him has been packed with so much fun and adventure.

Q: How do you juggle such a high-stress career with kids?

A: I have wonderful support. I could not do it without my husband and the wonderful women who help care for my children. Some days are very hard, and then I just go by faith.

Q: Favorite place to go with the kids in the Lowcountry?

A: We love Riverdogs Sunday night baseball games and Second Sunday on King Street. Yes, those are my boys dancing in the street without their shoes on!

Q: Favorite part of living in Charleston?

A: The beautiful landscape... the view from the bridges on my regular commute to MUSC still takes my breath away some days.

Q: Name two people you'd love to meet, either from the past or currently.

A: Amelia Earhart and Nelson Mandela.

Q: Do you have any advice for moms out there? Especially ones who may not be paying attention to their health?

A: It is easy when you are in charge of the wellbeing of others to neglect your own health. I see it all of the time. Often women get overwhelmed by the task and feel like their goals like getting in shape, losing weight, and taking care of their cholesterol is too hard or takes too much time to achieve. I encourage moms to instead think about self-care as an investment and focus on the process more than the ultimate goal.

Q: What things do you do to keep your heart healthy?

A: I am very careful about my diet, and try to eat a lot of fruits and vegetables. I maintain a healthy weight by getting plenty of fiber in my diet, staying away from refined carbohydrates and eating protein with breakfast. I also indulge in my fair share of red wine and dark chocolate!

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