

For Amanda Gonzalez, February Heart Month Holds Special Meaning

By **LORRAINE U. MARTINELLE**

When Buffalo Bills safety Damar Hamlin collapsed on the football field during a Jan. 2 game against the Bengals, he had experienced [cardiac arrest](#). One week later, on Jan. 11, Hamlin was discharged from the hospital and returned home. Alive.

For his family, friends, and fans, Hamlin's emergency was no doubt terrifying; his survival was incredible. [About 90% of people who experience an out-of-hospital cardiac arrest die.](#)

For **Amanda Gonzalez**, a senior talent associate in UMass Chan Medical School's Office of Human Resources since 2019, Hamlin's was a moment she could—unfortunately—relate to, having experienced cardiac arrest eight times—the first happening at the young age of 17, three days before her high school senior prom.

- [Watch Amanda's video.](#)

Now 34, Gonzalez is an advocate for heart health and serves as an ambassador for the [American Heart Association](#). In advance of National Heart Month in February, she sat down with *The Scoop* to answer some questions about Hamlin, "National Wear Red Day," and how her colleagues can learn more about taking care of their hearts, and the hearts of others.



"I'm very excited about Heart Month and have been working with Office of Well-Being on some fun things they'll host next month," said Gonzalez, a Millbury resident.

SCOOP: What thoughts were running through your mind when you heard about what happened to Damar Hamlin?

AG: My first thought was that I hope he survives this. You never want to hear of a life lost, and so I maintained faith and wishful thinking for this young man, his family, and friends.

Although I do not know Damar, I can identify with a lot of the same feelings that I imagine he is experiencing at this time. His survival story and experience does make me think back to my personal experience with cardiac arrest and it reminds me of how fragile life is, and how

lucky I am to be alive. It reminds me of how much I have to look back on and be thankful for. It also reminded me of how important it is to know [CPR](#), and how lucky we are to have such incredible medical professionals in the world who save lives every single day.

SCOOP: How can people best observe Heart Month in February?

AG: I think the best way people can celebrate Heart Month in February would be to do some self-reflection on your own heart health and how you can be a heart-healthy human.

Wear something red on [National Wear Red Day](#), which is Friday, Feb. 3. Make it a goal to learn CPR this year. I have partnered with the [Office of Well-Being](#), and they will host some great events in the month of February regarding heart health, which everyone can learn from and enjoy.

SCOOP: Will you be doing any outreach for the American Heart Association?

AG: Every year I volunteer for multiple events with the American Heart Association. So far, I'm looking forward to the Heart Ball at Mechanics Hall in Worcester on Feb. 11 and the annual Heart Walk this summer, which was held at Polar Park last year.

SCOOP: What do you want people to learn from your experiences with cardiac arrest?

AG: I want people to know that you can be any age and be affected by heart disease. I was only 17 when I experienced my first of seven cardiac arrests. Heart disease is 80% preventable. It's



also the number-one killer of women—more than all cancers combined.

It's so incredibly important to talk to your physician about preventative care, especially if you have any family history of heart disease. You can't manage what you don't measure, so know your numbers! For example, your blood pressure, blood sugar, cholesterol, etc. Ask your doctor to run some cardiac exams. Prevention is key, and there are things you can do to improve your heart health: Stay active, make yourself a priority, and don't ever give up.

I truly believe some of us go through life-altering experiences to better connect and help others who find themselves down a similar path.

I'm thankful to have had an amazing group of women who inspired me, and an organization such as the American Heart Association, which gave me a voice and a platform to share [my story](#).

It has changed my life so much and connected me with other survivors across the country who I consider dear friends. I call them my "heart sisters!"

*UMass Chan Medical School HR
Communications Specialist [Lorraine U. Martinelle](#) lost her father in 2014 to sudden cardiac arrest at age 63.*