



**T**here have been two constant themes in Pete Huttlinger's life: music and heart disease.

[Born with a heart defect](#), Pete lacked the energy to keep up with kids his age. So when they would go out to a field to play, he would bring a guitar or a banjo. Within about 15 minutes, while the other kids were just breaking a sweat, he'd be off to the side, picking and grinning.

"It was such a great source of enjoyment when I was watching them play football or just whenever I was alone," he said.

He was 12 when he had his first open-heart surgery. Much to the annoyance of his nurses, he plucked a banjo while in his hospital bed.

The procedure helped. By age 16, Pete was able to finally run an entire mile.

**P**ete graduated from the prestigious Berklee College of Music and became a touring musician. He's been nominated for an Emmy award, played on Grammy-nominated projects and won the National Fingerstyle Guitar Championship in 2000. He toured with John Denver and LeAnn Rimes, and recorded a tribute album to Stevie Wonder.

In July 2010, Pete received a [pacemaker](#)-defibrillator because of [congestive heart failure](#). That November, Pete awoke one morning and was paralyzed on his right side. He was having a [stroke](#).

Through months of physical therapy, Pete relearned how to play guitar. Then came another brutal challenge – severe [heart failure](#).

"That was the tricky one," he said.

Pete was flown from Nashville to Houston in April 2011. Days later, he received a type of heart pump called a left ventricular assist device (LVAD). It's a battery-operated device that helps maintain the pumping ability of a heart that can't effectively work on its own. Another Nashville star, country singer Randy Travis, received a similar device in July.

Now, Pete is healthy enough to [resume his career](#) and an active lifestyle. He walked a half-marathon exactly one year to the day after his life-saving flight to Houston. He also recently released a new CD, "[McGuire's Landing](#)," which includes a 52-page story that he wrote.

"I decided a long time ago, don't just live, live well," he said.

**T**hat's another thing Pete is known for – his positive outlook.

While hospitalized in Houston, Pete also developed intense passion for talking to others about living well. That led to his involvement with the American Heart Association/American Stroke Association, the nation's oldest, largest voluntary organization devoted to fighting cardiovascular diseases and stroke.

Pete volunteers in his hometown of Nashville, occasionally performing at events. He continues to push others to push themselves. Founded in 1924, the American Heart Association has funded research by 13 Nobel Prize winners and has been part of advancements such as the first artificial heart valve, cholesterol-inhibiting drugs, heart transplantation, and CPR techniques and guidelines.

“Don't give up,” Pete said. “Are you sick? Get up and go for walk. Healthy? Go help someone else. Because when you're giving, you're living well.”