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A HEART (AT LAST) FOR ALICE

After Two Years of Living with Congestive Heart Failure, Chino Woman Receives a Lifesaving VAD and a New Heart

LOS ANGELES (Oct. 17, 2008) -- Six months ago, Alice County was dying from congestive heart failure. Her weak heart was barely pumping blood, she was listless, had no appetite and had dropped 50 pounds in less than a year, and was so short of breath that she slept sitting up.

When the 61-year-old Chino, Calif. woman came to the Cedars-Sinai Heart Institute this past March, tests revealed her heart was so damaged that it was operating at less than 10 percent of normal capacity. "It was fluttering, not beating," says Ernst Schwarz, M.D., Ph.D., director of the Cardiac Support Program and co-director of Cardiac Transplantation at Cedars-Sinai's Heart Institute. She was immediately admitted to the hospital's intensive care unit. Absent a transplant, Schwarz feared she would be dead within six months.

The primary concern was that she wouldn't live until a donor could be found. And even if she did, they doubted that she could survive the arduous surgery. But this story has a happy ending thanks to County's strong will and the fact that she finally got the right treatment.

We had to do something to save her life, says Schwarz, "and there wasn't much time to act." Medication did little to improve her fragile condition, so surgeons implanted a ventricular assist device (VAD) the day after she was admitted. The mechanical pump, which helps a weakened heart pump blood throughout the body, is often used as a bridge to transplant to maintain or improve heart function and keep critically ill patients alive until donor hearts become available.

"I didn't realize how close to death I was," County recalls. "All the odds were against me and I know the doctor didn't expect me to live when he put in the VAD." But two weeks later, her condition stabilized enough because of the VAD and she went home to await a heart.

For County, coming to Cedars-Sinai was the last stop in a long odyssey in which she shuttled from one specialist to another, desperately seeking some relief. Initially diagnosed with congestive heart failure two years ago, an arsenal of medications kept her condition in check. But over the course of the past year, her health deteriorated—her breathing became so labored that she slept propped up on several pillows, her ankles would swell up to twice their size with fluid, and she was so exhausted she could no longer work.

County says her local doctor told her that she was suffering from bronchitis or the flu. She dutifully went in to see the specialist every week and took cold medications, but she just got progressively worse and was admitted to a local hospital for a battery of tests. An angiogram indicated that three of her arteries were blocked, but surgery wasn't recommended because her condition was so precarious.

(more)

According to County, she was then referred to another hospital where a specialist recommended implanting a defibrillator to make sure her heart continued to beat properly and that she didn't experience a potentially fatal episode of cardiac arrhythmia. But, she says, doctors were reluctant to operate because her health was so fragile.

Frustrated, her son, Patrick Morris, insisted she get an evaluation at Cedars-Sinai. "Once I got to Cedars-Sinai," says County, "everything turned around."

County got the call that changed her life on May 25th, the day before Memorial Day. She and her son and daughter-in-law had gone to church that Sunday and then had breakfast at a local eatery. When her daughter-in-law fished out some hand lotion from her purse, she noticed that her phone light was flashing—she had turned it off while they were in church. It was Cedars-Sinai; they had a heart for Alice.

"I was so excited and happy that I couldn't stop crying," she says.

The surgery was uneventful and County left the hospital two weeks later feeling better than she has in years. "It's truly a miracle," she says. "I keep telling people to be organ donors. I don't know the person who I got the heart from but I'm so appreciative because it has given me another chance at life."

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