

From a tragedy to a new life

A Hamilton man is alive and active today because of a double lung transplant

By SCOTT YOUNG

Next week, somewhere in Canada, a family's pain will cut a little deeper. The memories will come more vividly. The tears will fall more freely. Next week, a family will mourn the death of a loved one.

I will also remember. My memories will take me on an incredible journey, carrying me from past times of intense struggle, to present times of unbelievable joy.

The grieving family will never be far during this trip within my mind. We connect in a way that transcends average human relationships.

You see, next week marks an anniversary for all of us. Four years ago, a young man tragically lost his life. His family donated his organs for transplantation. I received his lungs.

For me, this anniversary is a wonderful celebration of renewed life and spirit. It is a time

to reflect on my past. It is a time to rejoice in the magnificence of my present. It is a time to hold hope for my future.

Next week is also a time to give thanks. I would not be alive today if it wasn't for the tremendous generosity of the donor and his family. Their gift of life was truly amazing.

Year and a half to live

In March 1991, my name went on the waiting list for a double lung transplant. Cystic fibrosis had severely damaged the lungs I was born with. They could no longer supply my body with enough oxygen. My doctors at the Toronto Hospital told me a donor had to be found within a year and a half or I would die.

Each day of waiting was an intense physical battle. I was attached to an oxygen tank at all times and every breath was difficult. It felt as if I was breathing through a straw. Simple activities like showering were monumental undertakings.

The emotional battle was even worse. The waiting period for organ transplants varies, but can often drag on for long, anxious months, sometimes years. Not knowing when, or if, my operation was going to take place was excruciatingly stressful.

The lengthy wait is due to a shortage of organ donors. There aren't many people who die in a way that leaves their organs viable for trans-

plant. Of the few deaths that are suitable, only a small percentage result in organ donations. Not enough people have signed donor cards and told their families of their wishes.

I knew a donor might not be found in time for me. Each night I went to bed without my transplant, I realized I had just "used up" one of the few remaining days I had left. I felt like a death row inmate, marking time on the wall of my cell.

Like a prisoner, my life was on hold while I waited. I remained within an hour of the Toronto Hospital in case I received the "Call." My pager went

everywhere with me. If a donor was found, the transplant co-ordinator would call me at home, and if I was not there, she would page me. Every time my phone rang, my heart leapt into my throat. "Is this it?" The constant pressure of not knowing, of not having any control, increased

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with each day.

Every Monday, I travelled to Toronto to attend a support group meeting. The patients from the Lung Transplant Program, all awaiting their "Call," would gather to lend support to one another. There were about 20 of us. We became very close.

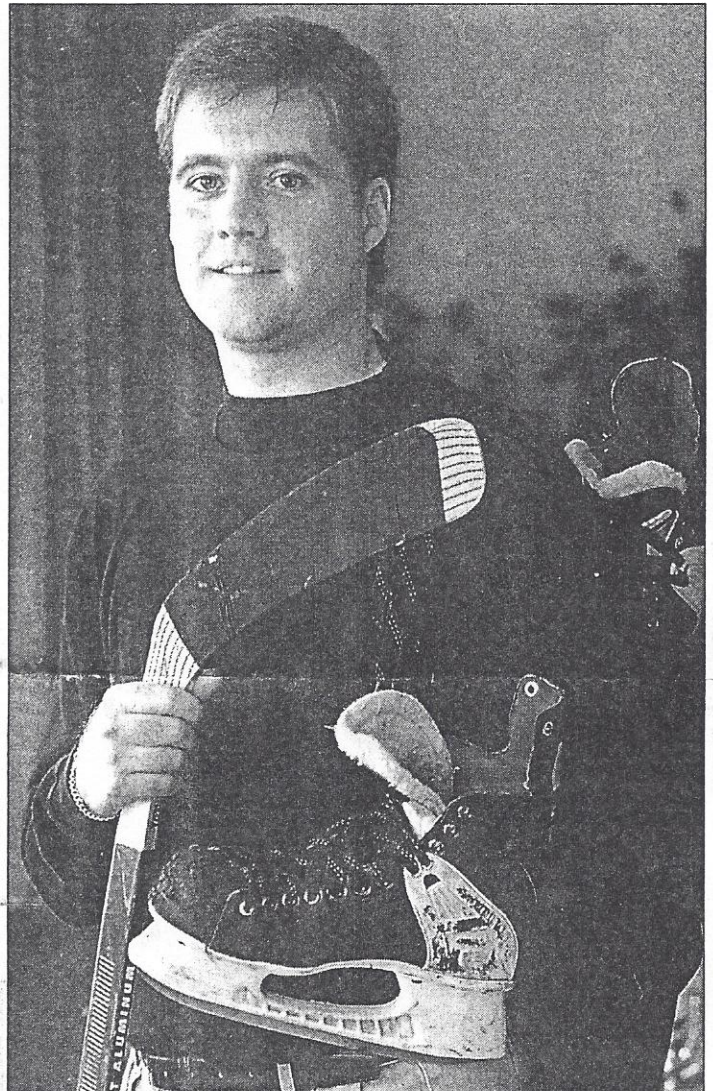
Some Mondays, we arrived to find one of the group missing. Sometimes, we smiled. One of us received a transplant. Often, we cried. One of us died before a donor could be found. Our tears were of sorrow and of fear. We missed special friends and were terrified of suffering the same fate.

My days of waiting turned into months, which turned into a year. I struggled to remain hopeful. Physically, I was slipping. Mentally, I was at the breaking point. A pair of lungs had to be found soon.

I began to think a lot about who my donor might be if one was found. It troubled me that he or she needed to die for me to live. I desperately wanted a second chance at life, but felt guilty hoping for a death. Eventually, I came to realize the donor was going to die regardless of what I wished for. If given the chance, I decided I would receive my lungs as a precious gift.

The call

One morning, in early May of 1992, I was sitting at home watching television. The phone rang. I picked up the receiver and froze. It was the trans-



Young: four years ago, a shower was hard work. Today, transplanted lungs let him lead an active life that includes hockey.

Cathie Coward, The Spectator

plant co-ordinator calling. A set of lungs was available. "Good ones," she said.

Suddenly, the 14 months of torturous waiting evaporated into an excitement filled with nervous exhilaration. I was getting my shot at a new life, a rebirth of sorts, made possible by the generosity of a family who knew nothing about me.

Imagine the pain the family felt when their loved one, the donor, died. Imagine the turmoil surrounding his unexpected death. In the midst of this incredibly trying time, the family thought of someone else. Although their loved one's life cruelly ended, they wanted his organs to give a complete stranger a chance at survival. In

fact, many strangers might receive this opportunity for life. Perhaps his kidneys, heart and liver were also suitable for transplant. The family's courage was remarkable.

While I lay waiting on the operating room table, minutes from my transplant, I was surprisingly calm. Tim Winton, the surgeon, told me the hard part was over. "You've made it this far, Scott. You survived the wait. Now go to sleep and let me take care of the rest."

The "rest," as they say, is history. The surgery went very well. My recovery was quick and relatively easy. Today I enjoy excellent health. The oxygen tank is gone, replaced by baseball gloves and hockey skates.

I can't adequately describe how wonderful it feels to stretch a single into a double, or how awesome it is when the cold air of an arena fills my new lungs as I skate hard during a hockey game. I once only dreamed of such things. Now, I live them.

In a perfect world, I would not have been sick. The donor would not have died. Unfortunately, life does not work this way. I urge all of you to consider organ donation as a way of creating a positive out of a negative. If donating your organs is a gift you want to give should the situation arise, sign a donor card, but what is more important, tell your family of your wishes. They are the ones who will ultimately make the decision.

To the donor and his family, I say thank you. Thank you for giving me back the most precious possession I have, my life. I will be forever grateful. Next week will be difficult for you. Old wounds will reopen as you revisit the events of four years ago. I hope you know your courage gave life. I hope this knowledge softens your pain. I hope you realize the magnitude of your generosity. I hope you know you are heroes.

Scott Young of Hamilton is an active volunteer with the Kidney Foundation, promoting organ transplants.
