HAMILTON ROTARY CLUB

When I was five years old, I experienced something that would forever influence my life.

I took part in my first hockey practice.

I remember how crisp the painted blue and red lines looked on the ice that day and how the white mesh of the nets glistened at either end of the arena.

It was magical.

As I skated around the rink, tightly holding my stick with my new gloves, I imagined that the seats were full of wildly cheering fans.

It sure didn't take me very long to fall in love with the game of hockey.

The reason I begin this afternoon with that anecdote from my childhood is I want to quickly take you on a journey through my life.
By doing so, I hope to capture the magnificence of organ donation and transplantation.

About a year before that first hockey practice of mine, I was diagnosed with Cystic Fibrosis, which some of you will know, is a very serious genetic lung disease.

At that time, my doctors told my parents that if I lived to be twelve years old, I would be lucky.

You can imagine how my parents must have felt watching me play at my first hockey practice.

Wondering how long I would be able to enjoy the game I so obviously loved.

Well, as it turned out, I was able to play for some time.

Thankfully, C.F. didn't begin to seriously affect my lungs until my late teens.

My childhood then, was really indistinguishable from any of the "normal" kids.

I didn't miss a lot of school, I was as rough in the playground as the rest of my friends and on the ice, I was able to skate like the wind.

As a youngster, hockey was a fun game to play, but when I turned thirteen, it became something more.

Hockey became my life. It consumed me.

I was either playing the game, thinking about the game, or dreaming about the game.

The highlight of my career came when I was sixteen years old.

I was playing for the Hamilton Huskies, the all star team here in town. We played in a league comprised of the best players in Ontario.

We had a great team that year.

I remember how hard my teammates and I worked in practice that season.

Our coach would skate us until we dropped.

I also remember how good that felt, my legs striding furiously as my lungs filled with the cold arena air.

It was so wonderful to be in peak physical condition.

All that hard work in practice paid off. My team made it to the Ontario Championship Finals.

It was a gruelling, tough series.

We won and when the final game ended I remember the unbelievable sense of jubilation as my teammates and I dove all over each other, our gloves and sticks hurled into the air in celebration.

I was on top of the world after that championship game.

I was so excited about where my hockey career might take me.

Playing professionally had always been a dream of mine, and that dream looked like it had a chance of becoming reality.

The future looked so bright.

When I think back to that time, it seems inconceivable that that future, the future that held so much promise, could so quickly fall to pieces. But it did.

You see, it wasn't long before playing hockey became a tremendous struggle.

Cystic Fibrosis began to take its toll.

I remember one of my last practices at the age of eighteen.

Working hard no longer felt good.

The cold arena air now assaulted my lungs, making me cough violently.

Instead of skating like the wind, I was winded.

It was too much for me, I gasped for breath, desperately trying to keep up with my teammates, but I soon knew it was hopeless.

My hockey career was over.

Having to give up the sport was extremely difficult.

Remember, it was more than a game to me, it had become a huge part of who I was.

Much of my identity and self esteem was tied to hockey.

Not being able to play was like having part of me die.

During my early twenties, my lung function continued its decline and soon, hockey wasn't the only part of me that was dying.

Stairs were replaced by elevators, then leisurely long walks were replaced by short ones, and eventually any kind of physical activity was replaced with . . . well, nothing really.

My life became a fading shadow of what it once was.

At the age of twenty five, my doctor sat me down.

He told me that my lungs would probably only keep me alive for another couple of years, - - - if I was lucky.

He suggested I think about having a lung transplant.

I wasn't ready to hear that.

When I looked in a mirror, I still saw Scott Young "The Hockey Player", even though that person had been gone for so long.

It took me a while, but eventually my denial was replaced with the shocking, terrifying truth.

The mirror image of the strong, fit athlete disappeared and for the first time I saw the thin, pale, breathless Scott Young.

It was now very clear to me that my doctor WAS right.

I WAS dying and a transplant WAS my only hope for survival.

I made arrangements to be assessed as a candidate for the Toronto Lung Transplant Program and thankfully, was deemed to be a suitable candidate

In March of 1991, I was put on the waiting list for a pair of lungs.

The thing I remember most about waiting for my transplant was the desperation.

Not knowing when, or more importantly, IF a suitable donor would be found.

There were about 25 other patients waiting for lungs in Toronto, and every Monday we would get together for a support group meeting.

We'd share our thoughts and feelings and really just try and help each other through this trying time.

We became a very close group.

These meetings were wonderful and played a large role in the maintenance of our sanities.

I'm very glad they were part of Toronto's program, but I have to tell you, some Mondays were pretty tough.

We'd arrive to find one of us missing from the group.

One of us had died before a donor was found.

On those Mondays, our tears were of sorrow and of fear.

We missed special friends and were terrified that we would be next.

While I was waiting I endured two false alarms.

The second one occurred in the middle of the night.

I was called at one in the morning and told that a potential donor had been found for me.

After being prepped for surgery and waiting until about five in the morning, I'll never forget when Tim Winton, my surgeon came to tell me the lungs turned out to be unsuitable for transplant.

He told me to hang in there, and that they'd find another set for me, but I had my doubts.

I mean, this was the second donor for me that did not turn out.

Maybe there was going to be a third, but I wasn't sure I could last long enough to find out.

When I came home after that second false alarm, I was lying in bed trying to get some sleep, when I was suddenly hit with quite a realization.

My having a false alarm meant that somewhere, a family was grieving over the death of a loved one.

I felt very guilty.

Here I was, hoping for a set of lungs to live, but that meant that someone else's life had to end.

I soon came to the conclusion, though, that donors were going to die regardless of what I needed and I decided that if given another opportunity, I would accept my lungs as a precious gift.

The days of waiting turned to months, which turned to a year.

My condition deteriorated with each passing moment.

The oxygen tank that had been my companion for the past year and a half, wasn't helping as much as it used to.

I was constantly out of breath and very close to being out of time.

But, then, 14 months after I was put on the waiting list, something truly amazing happened.

A family who knew nothing of my situation, decided to donate their sons organs after he was suddenly, tragically killed.

You can imagine their grief during such a trying time, yet, they had the courage and compassion to think of complete strangers.

They wanted their son's organs to give others a chance at life.

I was one of those "others"

The morning I received "the call", was a dark stormy one, not the kind of day you want to be going in for a transplant.

I really expected that the whole thing was going to be another false alarm.

After waiting about five hours at the hospital, I finally heard that, this time, the lungs were great.

But, there was a problem.

The weather was very bad up north where the donor was located.

The plane carrying the retrieval team, and my lungs back to Toronto, couldn't take off.

I couldn't believe it.

After all I'd gone through, finally a suitable set of lungs, but I still might not get my chance.

It was like living a nightmare.

I was actually in the OR, on the table, waiting for the weather to clear. Hoping for the weather to clear.

Finally, thankfully, it did.

Tim Winton came in and said the tough part was over, I had survived long enough to get my shot at a new life.

He told me to go to sleep and leave the rest to him.

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Well, the rest as they say, is history.

And today, life after transplant is wonderful.

Just living would be enough, but there has been so much more.

Stairs have now replaced elevators, and long walks are once again a joy.

In fact, just for fun, running now sometimes replaces walking.

But, for me, the most incredible thing of all, is I'm once again playing hockey.

For eleven, very long years, I had not stepped foot onto the ice, and I thought I never would again.

For eleven years, I dreamt almost every night about what it felt like to play hockey.

For eleven years, part of me was missing.

Well, I'm whole again.

I no longer dream about hockey, I play it.

The joy felt by that five year old boy at his first practice is duplicated every time I get to play.

You wouldn't believe how awesome it is to be once again skating hard, my lungs effortlessly filling with that cold arena air.

Every time I walk from the dressing room and head out onto the ice, I think about the donor and his family.

I thank them for their strength in adversity and for giving me the opportunity to once again live life to its fullest.

I also think about organizations like the Mutual Group, who are showing such tremendous corporate leadership and dedication to the cause.

I think about the Kidney Foundation, of which I am a proud member.

On the surface, it might seem strange for a lung transplant recipient to be working with the Kidney Foundation, but it actually makes complete sense.

Of all the health care organizations in this country, the Kidney Foundation is outdistancing everyone with respect to its Organ Donor Awareness initiatives.

Finally, I think about groups like yours.

I am alive today because of the synergy or the force created by people just like you.

You see, Organ donation is incredibly powerful, but it needs energy to be put in motion.

Each of you can give that energy.

You have the potential to contribute so much to the lives of the over two thousand Canadians who are currently waiting for transplant.

All you have to do is think about organ donation and decide whether it is a gift you would want to give someone, should the situation arise.

If it is, sign a donor card, but what is more important, discuss your wishes with your family.

They are the ones who will ultimately be asked to donate your organs for transplantation.

I don't want to lose any more friends because a donor can't be found.

I don't want to see anybody needlessly waiting on the transplant list for horrendous periods of time because a donor can't be found

I don't want to accept the present state of organ donation in Canada.

The number of Canadians on the transplant waiting list at the end of 1995 was 2554, which was an increase of 18% over the previous year.

The number of transplants performed in 1995 was only 1484, an increase of only .02% over the previous year.

As you can see, the transplant list is getting bigger, but the number of donors is not.

Organ donation in Canada remains static at about 14 donors per million population, significantly less then the donor rates in countries like Portugal, the U.S. or Spain which range from 20-27 donors per million population

While these are only statistics, you have to remember they translate into life and death reality for transplant patients in Canada.

That's why programs like By Mutual Consent are so important.

By becoming an organ donor and increasing organ donor awareness you do many tremendous things.

You give children the opportunity to grow and you give parents the opportunity to see them grow.

You give families special times together.

You give friendships.

You give memories and fun and joy and laughter.

You give life, and I don't think there is any other greater thing you could give.