

The Beat Goes On

By Michelle Brubaker | August 27, 2015

When Jon Marsh walked into the hotel conference room with his wife and son, you could hear a pin drop. He was about to meet the father of the man whose heart was now beating in his own chest.

“A day of miracles is really the best way to describe it,” said 44-year-old Marsh.



Jon Marsh, Mark Girard and Carol Knott

Marsh had suffered from heart failure as a result of a genetic condition. His health was declining so fast that a left ventricular assist device (LVAD), a mechanical pump, was implanted to keep him alive. Soon after, Marsh caught an infection from the device and became gravely ill. He was in a race against time for a donor heart.

“I started talking to my wife about arrangements after I passed away,” said Marsh. “After the transplant, I not only had hope, I had a new beginning. The donor heart was the most precious gift.”

It was the gift that kept on giving: Marsh was the second person to receive the heart, which was originally donated after the unexpected death of a 27-year-old man named Mark, called “Junior.”

“Junior was very passionate about outdoor sports - running, fishing, surfing and diving. He was a giving and generous person, so it’s not surprising he was an organ donor,” said Mark Girard, Junior’s father.

Soon after Junior died, his heart was transplanted into [72-year-old Roger Knott](#), who had been on the transplant list for two years.

“He received the call about an available heart on New Year’s Eve,” said Carol Knott, Roger’s wife. “It was a great heart, and he had so much energy. We had the best time post-surgery going on adventures and spending time with our grandchildren.”

But about a month after his transplant, Roger died of a stroke, unrelated to his new heart.

“When faced with the sudden death of Roger, his family showed no hesitation in passing the gift of life forward,” said [Victor Pretorius, MD](#), cardiothoracic surgeon at UC San Diego Health. “We had confidence that this heart could still save a life.”

That life was Marsh’s.

“As time passes, the donor heart gets more incorporated into the recipient’s chest, making the removal of such an organ complex and risky,” said Pretorius. “Roger had the donor heart for more than four weeks before he passed away. UC San Diego Health now sets the record for the longest time period in which a donor heart stayed in a recipient before being transplanted into another recipient.”

According to Pretorius, this rare transplant, using the same heart in two different people, has only happened 10 times in the world.

“I know Roger’s competitive spirit is so proud to be part of this amazing statistic,” said Knott.

Less than 5 percent of donor families actually meet after transplant surgeries, but thanks to [Lifesharing](#) [↗](#) – an organ donation organization at UC San Diego Health – one heart brought the three families involved together for the first time.

One heart goes to two people in rare transplant

“I’ve been very excited to meet the family who donated the heart originally and the man who got the heart after Roger,” said Carol. “My husband would be so happy to see how things turned out.”

Soon after Marsh entered the meeting room that day, he was greeted by a tight embrace from Girard.

“Meeting the recipient is emotional, heartwarming and really renews your faith that we are all here to do something special,” said Girard. “I know Junior is looking down today smiling.”

Girard, Knott and Marsh spent the day talking about their loved ones through tears and laughter. They shared pictures, stories and letters. Knott even got to listen to the strong heart beat in Marsh that once pumped in her husband’s body.

“It was through organ donation that this was all made possible,” said Pretorius. “Donor hearts are valuable treasures and all efforts should be made to increase the pool of them to save the lives of patients on the wait list.”

"I get to chase my son around now. I never got to do that before," said Marsh. "I have such a heart full of gratitude to my donors, and by meeting Mark and Carol today, I have added to my family."

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