

THE GIFT OF LIFE, BY HERMANN STEYN



The Waiting List

Over 4 300 people in South Africa are currently waiting for a life-saving organ transplant and that number increases every day. Despite the shortage of organs, those on the Waiting List live in a constant state of hope that their name will be the next called on the list.

I am a married father, and I live in Somerset West. I had end-stage cardiomyopathy and severe cardiomegaly (an enlarged heart), a life threatening heart condition, caused by my heart attack in 2006. I had been on the Waiting List for a new heart since March 2011. My life was a constant waiting game, hoping for the call to give me a new life. The call that a donor heart was available came on 4th December 2012 and I received the heart on 5th December 2012. This is my story.

My story

At about noon on a beautiful winter's day on 10 June 2006, I felt a tightness in my chest, was feeling weak and was perspiring heavily while attending a sporting event. I dismissed it as indigestion or "something else" and went to lie down in my car for about an hour. I then felt better but a surgeon friend of mine advised me to have my ECG done as a precaution.

On my way home I stopped at the Montana Clinic in Pretoria, where after an examination I was told that I had a heart attack a few hours earlier. I then suffered another heart attack in the hospital which was complicated by seven episodes of cardiac arrest. I only woke up two days later.

A few months later, after a period of hospitalization for congestive heart failure, I underwent triple bypass surgery. After developing atrial fibrillation two months after the bypass, I was quite ill until a bi-ventricular pacemaker was inserted in March 2008.

For the first time in two years I almost felt as normal as before my heart attack, but not quite. I was ready to get on with my recovery and plunged into a rehabilitation program. With my new lease on life, I set out to raise awareness of heart disease and its risks. I started to learn ways to change my lifestyle and decrease my likelihood of another heart attack, which included a focus on exercise, a proper diet, and ways to cope with stress.

Things went well for me until May 2010, when my heart muscle started to get progressively weaker and my condition gradually deteriorated to a point in October 2010 when my cardiologist told me that the only definitive procedure for me was a heart transplant. He referred me to Dr Willie Koen at the Christiaan Barnard Memorial Hospital in Cape Town. In November 2010 my assessment and tests were done and I was put on the waiting list for my Gift of Life.

At this stage, my long term prognosis was poor. I was too fatigued to do much, and had less and less energy. Simple things such as getting out of bed, taking a bath/shower or even walking were hard for me to do. I was struggling to breathe, and to do ordinary, everyday things that most people take for granted. I felt that my life wasn't in my own hands, and I kept my phone on me at all times, waiting for the call.

The Call

On 26 November 2012 I was at home and suddenly felt unwell. As this had happened before,

I knew my heart was in ventricular tachycardia. I called my wife and went to the bedroom to take my blood pressure. As I sat down on the bed, I received the first shock. My wife said that I went about 20 – 30 centimetres into the air. A few seconds after the first one, the second shock came and then the third shock. In the meantime my wife had put her shoes on and was ready to take me to hospital. As I was walking down the corridor to the car, the fourth shock came and I doubled up and nearly fell to the floor. I eventually made it to the car and my wife drove us to hospital.

We went to the emergency room where they immediately put me on drips and other medication. When I woke up, my cardiologist told me that he could not get the heart into rhythm. I was immediately put on the priority waiting list for a heart transplant. I was released from ICU seven days later.

On 4th December I was sitting on the coach watching television and my wife was preparing food, when my cell phone, which was lying on the coach next to me, rang. I immediately knew it must be Dr Willie Koen. However, I never thought of a transplant and thought that he only wanted to enquire about my health after the week in ICU. He said, "the chances are good that we might have an early Christmas present for you".

I was speechless. He then told me that the donor was a 32 year old man from Cape Town and that the doctors were still busy testing all the organs but that he couldn't have asked for a better heart for me. If everything was fine with both the donor and I, I would have the transplant the following morning.

On 5 December 2012 at 08:30 they wheeled me into theatre and at 15:20 they wheeled me out with a NEW heart. I was doing well in the hospital and was released from hospital 17 days after the transplant.

Sometime during the first few months after the transplant I must have tried to lift something heavy and I broke the four stainless steel wires that held the sternum together. My chest was opened again to bring the sternum together with ten wires.

I can't thank my Creator enough and I thank the donor and his family for my Gift of Love and all my friends and family all over the world for their prayers. Meanwhile, I'm still working on my "life list," the things I plan to do with my new heart after the recovery period is over in another few months.

I found out the hard way and if I can help others become aware of heart disease, then I may help someone else have extra years with their family. Survivors are lucky to be alive, and by taking care of yourself, you can reduce the likelihood of having a heart attack.