

GORDON HARRIS CHERISHES SECOND CHANCE AT LIFE AFTER HEART TRANSPLANT

Before receiving a heart transplant in fall 2017, Gordon Harris wasn't sure he'd live to see his grandkids grow up. "Every day I'd look in the mirror, and all I could see was death in my face," said Gordon.

The 67-year-old Sterling, Ill., resident was diagnosed with an enlarged heart in 2003. Gordon didn't realize he was that sick at first. He took the medication his doctors prescribed and continued to work until he retired in 2011. That's when his heart really started to fail. "I was losing a lot of weight," said Gordon. "I was feeling increasingly weak and getting tired. I could no longer do the things I wanted to do."

It was a dark time for the Harris family. Gordon is a family man who loves nothing more than to spend time with his wife of 47 years, his three kids and his seven granddaughters. But with his heart functioning at barely 25 percent, he couldn't even mow his lawn let alone go for a bike ride or a swim with the family. "I would look out the window and watch my neighbors cutting their grass, and that just kind of brought me down a little bit," said Gordon. "When you take away a man's independence, that's hard."

In May 2016, the doctors detected an irregular heartbeat, so Gordon went to the University of Chicago Medicine to have a cardiac ablation performed. "I went in on a Thursday and was supposed to go home on a Friday, but I didn't wake up until Saturday," Gordon said. "They lost me on the table and had to bring me back. After that, things got worse." Gordon was then referred to Loyola University Medical Center in Maywood, Ill., where he found out he needed a heart transplant. The doctors placed a peripherally inserted central catheter, or PICC, into Gordon to supply him with the medication he needed to keep his heart pumping until a donor heart could be located.

Gordon lived with that PICC line for four months before a donor heart became available. He went in for surgery at Loyola on Sept. 5, 2017, and he recovered so quickly that the medical staff started calling him "the rock star." Soon he was back home with his family.

Gordon was so grateful to have a second chance to do the things he never thought he'd get to do again that he decided to write a letter to the heart donor's family asking for an opportunity to thank them in person. "It took me awhile to write the letter because you really don't know what to say," said Gordon. "I just told them that I really wanted to meet them, but if they didn't want to meet, I would understand, and I would do my best to take care of the precious gift they've given me."

The donor's family did want to meet Gordon, and he and his family got to meet the donor's father, Michael Edwards, and other members of the donor's family. Gordon found out he received his new heart from 17-year-old Payton Edwards of Plymouth, Ill. Payton's father was happy to have received Gordon's letter and was excited to meet him. He wanted to make sure the person who received his daughter's heart would "cherish it forever." Michael expressed that meeting Gordon and his family made donation "all worth it."

"Gordon put my head on his chest, and I could hear Payton's heart beating strong and fast," Michael said. "It was beautiful. It really was. It felt like she was with us. It brought me so much peace that there's still a part of her with us somehow. Gordon is a beautiful soul. He was so grateful, and his family was so grateful. It made it all worth it to know how much they cherish Payton's precious gift and to hear from Gordon that he promises to always take care of it and keep Payton's memory alive."

"They lost a life, and they saved a life," Gordon said. "I'm just thankful for every minute of the day that I get."



During their first meeting, Michael (left) heard the heart of his 17-year-old daughter Payton beating inside Gordon's chest.