


NORTHWEST HERALD

Local News and Video for McHenry County, Illinois

'I want to do everything'

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 Comments (No comments posted.)

After being on the organ transplant waiting list on and off for almost seven years, Megan Herdegen received a new set of lungs a four weeks ago today.

The 28-year-old McHenry woman has battled severe asthma since she was a baby and had been breathing through a tube in her neck for the past two-and-a-half years. She could not speak above a whisper and had to drag a heavy oxygen tank wherever she went.

Now that she has healthy lungs, doctors do not expect her asthma to come back, Herdegen said, and she will be able to run, dance and play with her 3-year-old nephew, Mason.

"I want to do everything," she said. "I definitely want to get back into theater and band. I want to travel. My biggest goal is to take my nephew for a walk or to the park and chase after him, run up the slide and play with him without having to stop every five minutes or drag my tank along."

Herdegen received two healthy lungs because a 22-year-old had signed up to be an organ donor. Herdegen knows nothing more than the age and height – 4 feet 9 inches – of her donor, but she is grateful for the gift.

"At first I was very glad and thankful that they donated, and of course I'm sad that they had to die, but I can't help but think that there's a reason, so that makes it a little easier," Herdegen said. "I just hope that their family was OK with that person's decision."

Since Illinois changed its organ donation policy and created a new donor registry in January 2006, an individual who registers as an organ donor no longer needs consent from family after death in order to donate.

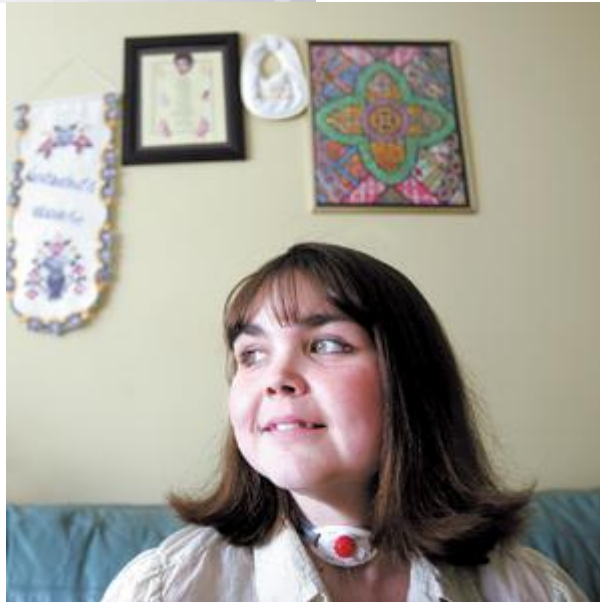
Herdegen said she planned to send a letter to her donor's family, and the family could choose whether contact her.

Getting the call

Herdegen got a call that lungs were available about 1:30 a.m. July 18. It was her first call in more than six years on the waiting list, and she half expected it to be a false alarm, her mother said.

She entered the operating room at Loyola University Medical Center in Maywood just before 4 p.m. and was in surgery for about five hours, her mother said.

When she woke up after the surgery, she felt different.



McHenry resident, Megan Herdegen, is recovering at her grandmother's home in Arlington Heights after receiving a lung transplant July 18th. (Kristy Ann Mann photo)

"It felt like the lungs were too big," she said. "They felt heavy. It was different because I could feel myself breathing."

Herdegen did not get to see her own lungs, but was told they were small and shriveled.

Herdegen was released from the hospital Aug. 3 and now is recovering at her grandparents' home in Arlington Heights.

Her mother, Diane Herdegen, said she was coping as she had for the past 28 years of watching her daughter go in and out of hospitals, never knowing whether she would come out each time she was admitted.

"When you have someone that's so sick, you have this roller coaster of emotions all the time, on a daily basis," she said. "I've learned over the years a lot of ways of dealing with things."

Recovery

Everyone who enters the Herdegen home in Arlington Heights must sanitize their hands. Megan Herdegen cannot go out in public for at least three months, and she takes 22 medications daily, including four medications so her body does not reject its new lungs.

The first three months after a transplant are the most difficult as doctors wait to see whether the body will reject the new organ, Diane Herdegen said. But once Megan is fully recovered, her mother expects her to once again pick up her life where she left off.

"I know she's wanted this," Diane Herdegen said. "When somebody gives her the OK, I'll probably never see her again."

Megan Herdegen said she still was getting used to the idea that she has had a transplant.

"It's still unreal to me because it's been so long that I really didn't think it was ever going to happen," she said. "Even now that I'm home and taking all the medications and everything, I still can't believe that I can say that I had a transplant instead of 'I'm waiting for one.' "

By the numbers

4,723 Number of people waiting for transplants in Illinois.

63 Number of people waiting for lungs in Illinois.

34 Number of patients in Illinois who received lungs in 2006.

Source: Kim McCullough, spokeswoman for Gift of Hope Organ and Tissue Donation Network

To become a donor

Sign up to become an organ donor by visiting www.giftofhope.org. If you joined the Illinois organ and tissue donation registry before January 2006, you must re-register.