

Tillman recounts ordeal leading to heart transplant

BEAR FACES TOUGHEST FOE | Tillman recounts ordeal leading to heart transplant

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When Bears cornerback Charles Tillman first learned that his 3-month old-daughter, Tiana, suffered from a heart condition called cardiomyopathy, a transplant was the furthest thing from his mind.

"At that point in time, I didn't know what it was," he said. "I said, 'OK, we'll give her some [cough syrup], and it will be OK.' I didn't think it was something serious."



Charles Tillman talks about his five-month old daughter, Tiana, who received a heart transplant one month ago at Children's Memorial Hospital at a news conference on Friday.

(John J. Kim/Sun-Times)

Over the next three months, Tillman would become an expert on the disease -- and an advocate for organ donation.

"Never in a million years would I have thought my daughter would have to have a heart transplant," he said at a news conference Friday at Children's Memorial Hospital. "The toughest thing I battled with was that I knew in order for my daughter to live, another kid had to die. But I realized it's taking something negative and making it into a positive."

With red-rimmed eyes, Tillman talked about how Tiana was flown by helicopter to Children's Memorial Hospital in May, and how he held her in his arms while she battled for life, her enlarged and weakened heart beating 220 times a minute as it fought to pump blood through her tiny body.

"It started to hit me," he said. "I might lose my daughter. . . . I wanted to cry, I wanted to just quit. I wanted to do all of that. But I couldn't. I think it was the gift of energy. When life hands you these bad things, it's a gift that God gives you to keep moving on. I can't explain it, but I know it does exist."

During this time, Tillman and his wife, Jackie, did what any family with a critically ill child would do. They prayed, and then prayed some more.

Football was an afterthought. Yet Tillman knew he had a job to do. Although he missed some offseason workouts and some of training camp, he played in all four exhibition games.

"I'm not going to lie; it was hard," he said, thanking the Bears organization for its support. "I felt guilty being at work and not being with my kid. Did I want to just, like, quit and give up and just be [at the hospital] all the time? Oh, definitely. This is my daughter, and I only had her three months."

Tiana, now 6 months old, received a heart transplant in late July and was released from the hospital Monday.

"She's smiling and kicking and cooing, all that stuff 6-month-olds are supposed to do," Tillman said.

Bears coach Lovie Smith said the entire organization was praying for Tillman's family during the ordeal.

"There is a time to go to work and a time to take care of other things," Smith said. "We're just thrilled this story is going to have a happy ending."

While Tiana was waiting for a new heart, doctors employed a Berlin Heart, a device that takes over the heart's pumping action, to stabilize her condition. Although widespread in Europe, the Berlin Heart has not received FDA approval for use in the United States. This is the first time it was used in Illinois.

"It's a technology that pushes the envelope," said Carl Backer, surgical director of heart transplantation at Children's Memorial. "One of our biggest obstacles in heart transplantation is waiting for a heart. Now we have a device that is so streamlined that even babies can be supported by it for a year if need be."

Tillman praised the staff at Children's, and urged everyone to register as an organ donor at donatelifeillinois.org.

"That family out there, I thank them from the bottom of my heart," he said. "They did a very noble thing."