



NIAGARA FALLS: Young woman's heart beats on

12/5/2007 - Tragic accident gives California man a new lease on life

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"My name is Lynn Lincoln. We believe my husband got your daughter's heart."

Thus began an October phone call which brought together two families — one living in Niagara Falls, the other in Anaheim, Calif. — under extraordinary circumstances.

It began on July 5, when 21-year old Niagara Falls High School graduate Denise McArthur was in a deadly car accident while visiting Las Vegas.

McArthur, who was described by family members as an extremely loving, popular person with an unusually keen sense of how to treat animals, was an adamant advocate of organ donation. She had recently finished her first year as a transfer student at SUNY Oswego, where she was majoring in zoology and animal management, her parents said.

"She was everybody's mother," said her father, Dennis McArthur, who owns Falls-based D.J. McArthur General Contracting. "She'd call you on a cold day to say, 'you're on a roof, are you safe?' She was always taking care of other people."

Angela McArthur, Denise's mother, received the call about her daughter's accident while visiting Darien Lake Theme Park. Dennis was at work. That night the family, including Denise's two sisters, Michelle, 20, and Tricia, 18, boarded a plane and flew to Las Vegas. Denise made it through a night at the University Medical Center of Southern Nevada in Las Vegas before doctors pronounced her legally dead because a nuclear scan found no blood flow to her brain, even though she was still breathing.



For Denise's parents, the decision to donate her organs was easy, despite the painfully long application process and physical tests which must be performed. They were allowed to say good-bye one last time before four separate teams of doctors harvested her kidneys, liver and heart and rushed them to waiting patients.

Nearly all of Denise's body was also taken, including her eyes and parts of her skin to help burn victims.

New heart for middle-aged man

One of those patients was Ed Lincoln, a 57-year old small business consultant from Anaheim who had been laying in a bed at Cedar-Sinai Medical Center in Beverly Hills, Calif. Lincoln's cardiovascular problems had plagued him for 20 years, including eight heart attacks and three open heart surgeries.

That eighth heart attack had sent Lincoln — who has a wife whose real name is Loretta Lynn

Roberts, and six grown children — to the hospital's ICU unit at the beginning of June, where he said he was on about nine different IVs to keep his heart beating. Doctors told Lincoln a new heart was his only hope of survival, and he was at the top of the waiting list for available transplants.

"I was waiting," he said.

In a whirlwind after Denise's death, Lincoln was informed that a new heart was located — though he wasn't told of the circumstances surrounding Denise's death or anything about her. On July 8, doctors placed Denise's heart into Lincoln's chest. On July 10, Lincoln opened his eyes and asked if he was alive.

"Yeah, you're alive," somebody in the room told him. "And you've got a new heart."

Almost 40 days and several near-death experiences later, Lincoln was released from the hospital down from 240 pounds to 170 and suffering from breathing problems which are expected to last another year. But he had a new heart.

"There's a lot of initial emotion and a lot of confusion," he said. "I feel like being in there so long, I aged. I'm not 100 percent myself."

There was another nagging issue. Lincoln had no idea where the heart came from, and the transplant coordinators at the hospital wouldn't tell him, citing privacy rules.

McArthurs waiting, wondering

Across the country, the McArthurs were wondering the same thing. They had returned to their 72nd Street home and held a wake for Denise on July 12 and 13. Over 800 people, many of them young adults, packed a church for the July 14 funeral, where four people gave eulogies.

"You're kind of in a daze when you lose a child," Angela said. "The support we received was overwhelming."

Family and friends turned their attention to grieving and trying to make sense of the painful loss. The McArthurs also waited with interest for the Nevada Donor Network's promised letter giving general descriptions of the people who received Denise's organs. When they received it on Sept. 24, Angela immediately penned a letter back to the man with their heart, through the network.

Back in California, Lincoln was faxed the letter through the Beverly Hills hospital. All the information about Denise was blacked out. The next time he visited the facility he insisted on the real letter.

When he received it, he went back home and, with his wife, began piecing together the information. There was a reference to the Buffalo Zoo, where Denise had worked for a year. After nearly four hours of looking, they made out the last name 'McArthur' through the black marker.

Using the name and general area, the Lincoln's found Denise's MySpace page. He had found the original owner of his heart.

"When I found out it was a 21-year old girl and the circumstances, I think I cried for four hours," he said. "I'm 57. She was 21. She was quite accomplished and had a lot to contribute to life."

Phone call leads to meeting

Lincoln's wife called the McArthurs and they spoke for about 10 minutes. Of his first reaction, Lincoln called Angela an "incredible woman who just makes you feel comfortable," and said the family as a whole are, "great people." Angela said Ed Lincoln was "easy to talk to" and "worthy of Denise's heart."

The McArthurs found out that Ed shared Denise's love of animals, dancing and movies. He'd also developed a lust for ice cream since his surgery that never existed before.

"Denise loved ice cream," Dennis said.

Though all involved admitted a combination of fear, nerves and reservation, a chance to meet soon presented itself. The McArthurs had to fly to Las Vegas to begin settling Denise's estate, including her medical bills. It's only several hours from Anaheim.

They met at a mini-suite in Harra's Hotel and Casino on the Vegas Strip.

"It was a strange trip, but it was almost like we were meeting friends," Ed said. "It was almost like meeting somebody I've known for awhile."

The two couples met and talked in the hotel room, where Ed let Angela put her head to his chest and listen to her daughter's heart. In an interview at her home weeks later, Angela couldn't keep a smile off her face when describing the incident.

They then went to dinner at a restaurant in the hotel. The next day, they had lunch. Afterwards, they agreed the experience was a positive one.

"Initially I would have liked to have somebody a little less younger, or with a few less medical problems," Dennis said. "But after the meeting all that changed."

Ed agreed. "It was a really nice time," he said.

Dealing with the present

The couples returned home and are trying to resume their lives. The McArthur family is also waiting to hear back from the people who received the kidneys and liver.

They say that meeting Ed Lincoln has not given them closure, but it has made their daughter's lost life a little more acceptable.

"We badly wanted to feel some sense of positive could come out of our daughter's death," Angela said.

The McArthurs also hope that the experience can somehow affect others, both encouraging them to be organ donors and making public their frustrations with the process.

"Whatever it takes to be an organ donor, if that's what your child wants, then do it," she said.

Ed has meanwhile used the experience to change the focus of his life. While he recovers physically from the ordeal, he said he is putting together a show for the radio station he occasionally works about Denise's life and his own experience which will serve as a tribute to her legacy, tentatively titled, "Denise's Heart." He plans to actively promote organ donation in the future and also wants to give a bench to the Buffalo Zoo in Denise's honor.

"In receiving the heart of this very outgoing 21-year old, I have been charged with doing something to keep her memory alive and to keep her memory going forward," he said. "This is something I'll never forget."