Mike’s birthday wish came true – he got a new heart

Mike Hill went to bed the night before his 54th birthday wondering what kind of cake he might have the next day. A phone call early the next morning changed those plans. Instead of cake, he would be getting a new heart for his birthday.

Mike had a history of heart problems dating back to the 1990s. His first heart attack happened while he was at work, operating a bulldozer. Doctors in his hometown of Hazard, Ky., were able to place two stents in his heart to open a blockage in blood flow.

Another heart attack followed in 2010. That time, it was the type of heart attack known as the “widow maker” because it almost completely blocks the left coronary artery and often leads to death. Doctors in Hazard continued to care for Mike near his home for about a year. But Mike’s heart was getting weaker. He could barely walk from one end of his house to the other without getting short of breath.

His local doctors knew Mike needed a higher level of care. They referred him to the UK Gill Heart Institute.

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– Mike Hill

(continued)
“They said my heart was so bad, there was really nothing else they could do for me there,” Mike said. “My doctor in Hazard said he had a friend at UK and could get me in to see him. That’s when I was introduced to the whole UK team.”

Waiting for a donor

In September 2011, Mike met with Navin Rajagopalan, MD, medical director of heart transplantation and director of the UK Advanced Heart Failure Clinic at the UK Gill Heart Institute. Dr. Rajagopalan adjusted Mike’s blood pressure medication and put him on another drug for congestive heart failure that helps the heart pump. He told Mike he would be a good candidate for heart transplantation because he was otherwise fairly healthy.

Except for regular appointments with his UK HealthCare doctors, Mike waited at home in Hazard for a heart donor. About 5 a.m. on Sept. 19, 2013, Mike’s 54th birthday, a nurse from UK called to let him know a heart was on the way.

“We have three grandsons,” Mike said. “That’s all that was running through my mind, just to be able to get outside and play with them [my grandsons] and enjoy life as it was before.”

That afternoon, Mike underwent a five-hour surgery to receive his new heart, which had belonged to a 30-year-old man. Mike’s wife, Claudia, his sister, two daughters and three grandsons heard regular updates from nurses who came out to give them information on Mike’s condition.

Mike said he woke up feeling entirely different than before the surgery.

“I felt like my chest was shaking because I hadn’t had a normal, beating heart in so long,” he said. “My wife put her hand on my chest, and it was just a joy to feel that new heart inside me beating so strongly.”

Getting back on the bike

The day after surgery, Mike was able to get out of bed for a while. On the second day, he walked 1.2 miles through the hospital.

Tests haven’t shown any signs that Mike’s body will reject his new heart. He plans to spend more time with his family and return to one of his favorite activities – riding his Harley-Davidson Sportster motorcycle.

“Every bike I see or hear, I have to stop and look at it,” he said. “They said as soon as I got back home, there’s no limitations to what I could do as long as I feel OK. I’m ready to go.”

Mike said he’s grateful for his entire care team at UK HealthCare. While he was waiting for his new heart, he especially liked a calendar he received from the UK Transplant Center, which showed a successful transplant patient for each month and described his or her story.

“Just reading the bios on the calendar would give me incentive not to get discouraged and start feeling sorry for myself,” he said. “I would look at that and think, one day maybe it’ll be me getting a heart.”

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