Young Lexington woman finds help for heart failure

Not long after moving to Kentucky from Florida, Allyson Lovell thought she was having a bad bout with allergies. After all, Kentucky is known for the problems it can cause allergy sufferers.

After a time, other causes were considered. But when several rounds of antibiotics didn't cure her cough and shortness of breath, Allyson, then 23, knew something was wrong. On a weekend trip to Chicago in February 2014, she couldn't walk more than a block without stopping to take a rest. Her legs were swollen, and she had no appetite.

“My cough sounded like a motorcycle starting, just really not normal at all,” Allyson said.

Her primary care doctor referred her for an echocardiogram at a local Lexington hospital, where a cardiologist told Allyson plainly: “Young lady, you’re very sick.”

He immediately sent Allyson to the Gill Heart Institute, where she could receive the best care possible for her condition, myocarditis. It’s an infection that in Allyson’s case led to severe congestive heart failure.

“[The doctor] said he only sends away a few patients a year, but he knew I needed to be cared for at Gill,” Allyson said.

A failing heart

The news was scary for Allyson’s parents, who saw her as an otherwise healthy young woman.
“Allyson came home from her first doctor visit and said she had bronchitis, and now she’s in congestive heart failure,” said her mother, Kathleen. “But everyone at Gill kept us all really calm. They put everything in terms we could understand and reassured us Allyson would be OK and they would do everything they could to get her better.”

Allyson’s ejection fraction was only 8 percent. That means with each heartbeat, her heart was only pushing out 8 percent of the blood in the left ventricle. Her doctors at the Gill Heart Institute – Allison Bailey, MD, and Navin Rajagopalan, MD – were amazed she had gone to work the day before.

“Not knowing anything about this, I thought everyone with heart failure must be at 8 percent,” Allyson said. In fact, anything below 35 percent is considered heart failure, and most patients don’t go below 20 percent. A healthy heart will pump at 55 to 70 percent.

Allyson stayed in the ICU at UK Albert B. Chandler Hospital for a week while she took medicines to improve her heart’s function. Doctors told her and her family that if those didn’t work, she would need a heart transplant.

Compassionate care

On the day Allyson learned she might need a transplant, a UK nurse came into her room to talk with her.

“I was sitting there thinking about how I’m really sick,” Allyson said. “The nurse just sat there listening to me and said, ‘I can’t imagine what you’re going through. But you’re 23. You have the rest of your life ahead of you. So you have to figure out how to live that life the best you can.’”

That kind of compassion was what Allyson and her family came to expect during her three weeks in the hospital and in her follow-up appointments at the Gill Heart Institute.

“As the parents of a young adult, the doctors always tried to include us,” Kathleen said. “We tried to give her space and let her handle as much as she could. But we knew she was in good hands. … We felt like she was at the right place, where she needed to be.”

Back to normal

The medicines prescribed by her Gill doctors worked. By the end of July 2014, Allyson’s heart was back to normal function.

“I’ve never been so excited to be normal,” she said. “I hope I stay normal forever.”

She still stays in touch with her doctors and nurses, occasionally stopping by with cookies.

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– Kathleen Lovell, Allyson’s mother

“Being in a hospital room by yourself can be a sad place,” Allyson said. “All the nursing staff, they’re the ones who see you the most. They hold you together. And they were wonderful.”

Allyson’s illness was the first time her parents had had any experience in a hospital since childbirth. They were relieved to know the expert care Allyson needed was available in Lexington.

“I grew up here, so I know how the whole campus has just blossomed,” said Allyson’s father, Brad. “So having now taken advantage of what’s there, we are quite blessed to have them. What a great place.”

For more information about the services available at the UK Gill Heart Institute, call 800-333-8874.