

Congenital Heart Disease

According to the American Heart Association around 650,000 to 1.3 million Americans have a congenital heart defect. Approximately 36,000 babies are born with a heart defect each year. That is one in eight. Many of these children have heart surgery and some receive a heart transplant.

Twenty-five years ago doctors had little knowledge to offer parents of these children, especially those with complicated heart issues. These children died. With new heart surgery techniques and heart transplants many of these “no help for them” children are alive and doing well. Many of these children are living to adulthood. This has created a whole new group of heart patients. My son, Nick is one of these patients.

Nick was born with hypoplastic left heart syndrome or a three chambered heart. He had his first heart surgery at five days old, went on to have another at three months old and again a one year old. Just before Nick turn two he received a heart transplant. The first year after transplant was intense with us making numerous midnight trips to the hospital. In time, the trips decreased. Nick suffered mostly from sinus and ear infections.

Nick grew and attended pre-school, even rode the bus to school his first day of kindergarten. He has learned to swim, snow ski, water ski, and has seen forty-nine of the fifty states and thirteen countries in Europe. He has been a member of Team

Georgia at nine of the Transplant Games. In high school, he was a manager for the football team and played tennis four years.

He has since started college but had to withdraw when an infection settled on the site where his first surgery was performed. At the point of death, Nick went into surgery again. His main vessel, the aorta, was replaced. He recovered faster and with less difficulty than anyone expected. A few months later he needed a pacemaker for a slow heart rate.

Today, nineteen years and twenty one birthdays later, Nick is doing well despite the hard road he has traveled. He is attending college again and plans to study sports management. He helps coach a local high school tennis team and a nine year old baseball team. He is living life.

Heart transplants are not a fix, but a treatment, so we still worry about rejection and the future. But with all things said and done, it has been wonderful to see Nick grow up, and turn into a young man that understands the value of good health, and that enjoys being alive.

Nick's life wouldn't have been possible without the precious gift of a heart. At our house, we understand how important organ donation is every single day.