

Teen Patient Anticipates Swim After Transplant

Cassie Tessier loves to swim and, for the first time in more than eight years, she will soon be able to take the plunge once again.

This 17-year-old girl, who recently received a double lung transplant, was diagnosed in 2000 with pulmonary hypertension. The diagnosis, and her Flolan™ treatment, came just months after her placement on a local swim team.

"She just loved the water. She was one of those kids you'd always find in the water," Cassie's mother, Brenda Winters, says.

The long-anticipated swim will take place this summer after Cassie has recovered from the January 31 transplant.

Cassie underwent the 15-hour transplant surgery a month after suffering a collapsed lung on December 26, 2008. When her lung collapsed, Cassie was admitted to Children's Hospital Boston in critical condition. "She was on the ventilator for nine days, and they were just working on getting her better to go home," Brenda says.

Cassie was also relisted on the lung transplant list at that time, and the family received word of the available lungs just five days later on December 31.

"Children's Hospital in Boston has just been phenomenal," Brenda says.

After the surgery, Cassie spent the first two months in the hospital. She is now at home with weekly visits to Children's Hospital, and her family is in the process of adjusting to a new lifestyle.

"It's still too new because, in the beginning, she really has to stay away from people because of her immune system," Brenda explains, "and just not having a Flolan™ system is different."

Cassie is the second person in her family to be diagnosed. Brenda says her late husband was diagnosed with PH in 1977 and received a single-lung transplant in St. Louis in 1990.

"We were told before we had the kids that it wasn't hereditary," Brenda says. "It was before they knew that, in truth, it can be hereditary."

After Cassie's diagnosis, Brenda said she was "scared and in shock because I knew how serious it was but we were the type of people to put our faith and trust in God."

Cassie stayed active after her diagnosis even though her favorite hobby — swimming — was not an option. Cassie joined her school's art and drama

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clubs, went horseback riding and was the first PH patient to attend the Paul Newman's Hole in the Wall Gang Camp in Ashford, Conn.

"Camp was the thing she looked forward to every year. It was her highlight. She could not wait to get to camp," Brenda says. "We were not going to let PH or Flolan™ take over our lives."

In an effort to fight back, Cassie began going door-to-door at Halloween to raise awareness and money for PH treatment and a cure.

"She wanted to do the Halloween fundraiser this year, but she was in the hospital," Brenda says.

Throughout the years, friends, teachers and the community have shown support to Cassie and her family. "Cassie is my best friend," Elizabeth Raucher says. "I care about her and I want to do what I can to help."

One such community show of support was a concert featuring four bands, which was held March 14. Cassie says organizers raised more than \$4,000 to help offset medical costs not covered by insurance, such as traveling and food.

Brenda says that by wearing a medical mask, Cassie was allowed to make an appearance at the concert. "Cassie looked so great," Brenda remembers. "She was just so happy because she was going to see her friends and be in a normal atmosphere outside of the hospital."

Cassie's friend Elizabeth hopes to hold a future fundraiser one day. Cassie "is pretty hyper. She has fun and loves her life," Elizabeth says. "She never lets PH hold her back when she can, and I think that is pretty cool." ♦

*By Sarah Morris
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