IN THE BURBS

Thirteen years later, his heart goes on

Daniel Patrick Sheehan

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Another 14-year-old might have developed a keen aversion to hospitals after a heart transplant and cancer, but Chris Wolfe couldn't get enough of them. He liked the science, the machinery, the doctors and nurses, the human dramas unfolding along the corridors.

Few people know at 14 what they want to be at 27, but Wolfe can easily discern the roots of his present life in those hospital days. Thirteen years after the massive disruption of his adolescence by an apparent virus in his heart, the South Whitehall native works at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania -- where he had his transplant in 1996 -- as a physician assistant. And he's assigned to a ward where he cares for -- what else? -- heart patients, bringing an insider's savvy and sensitivity to desperately ill people awaiting a second chance.

It gets better. Wolfe's boss at the Philadelphia hospital is the cardiac surgeon who performed his transplant.

"The irony of this and wonder of the story is hard to get away from," said the surgeon, Dr. Michael Acker, head of HUP's heart transplant program. "When I first met him he was dying, and we put a [heart-assisting device] in him as a bridge to a transplant."

Readers might remember Wolfe's story. In March 1996, he was a sports-mad eighth-grader at Troxell Middle School when a cough and vomiting landed him at the doctor's office and an X-ray showed his heart was enlarged.

He was all right for a couple of months but began deteriorating swiftly as his heart labored harder and harder. The implantation of the ventricular assistance device, or VAD, bought him time until a heart became available in June.

"It changes how you approach life," Wolfe said the other day, remembering the surgery and its aftermath: a bout of cancer induced by anti-rejection drugs and a flirtation with rejection, both resolved through tweaking of his medicines.

He dismissed that episode as "one little hiccup" in his recovery. Other "hiccups" included a major abdominal surgery in 2000 to close a hole in his diaphragm that never healed when his VAD was removed; and five operations to correct a problem with the pressure in his right eye.
Through all of it, Wolfe, now living in Lansdale, graduated from Parkland High School, Muhlenberg College and the physician assistant program at DeSales University. The degree allows him to practice a broad range of medical techniques under a doctor's supervision.

"He is a great guy and happens to be a wonderful [physician assistant] taking care of our heart surgery patients," Acker said.

If Wolfe had any regrets over the rough turns of his life, they have been thoroughly effaced by an optimism that seems to bubble up from a spring deep within him. Knowing his life span as a transplant is uncertain, he speaks casually about daily joys: the sunny day, his rewarding job, his girlfriend and family.

"As a transplant, you have to live day by day," he said. "Prepare for the worst and hope for the best."

Being able to work full time "is a privilege," he added. He has two jobs, both stemming from rotations he worked as part of his degree program. Besides working at HUP, he assists a Lehigh Valley psychiatrist, mainly tending to dementia patients at a nursing home.

But he finds his greatest fulfillment at HUP, where Acker, profoundly pleased to find his one-time patient doing so well, hired him last year. In tending pre-operative and post-operative patients, Wolfe is able to share insights and encouragement like no one else on staff.

"Talk about your instant support group," Acker said.

daniel.sheehan@mcall.com

610-820-6598

--Chris Wolfe

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