



## Heartfelt thanks for another chance

By Mick Zawislak | Daily Herald Staff

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He doesn't care for stuffing or cranberries so Bill Coon intended to make a beeline for the ham and mashed potatoes on Thanksgiving.

"Right now, I just have to watch my sugar a little bit. Other than that, I'm back to eating anything I want," the upbeat 20-year-old said of sharing the big feast with about three dozen relatives.

Food is a focus on any Thanksgiving. But in the big picture, the bounty was incidental for the Lake Zurich resident, who

for the second time in his young existence has received another chance.

"I never had a distinct thing to be thankful for but this year, I obviously do," he said.

Fighting for his life, Coon in late October received a new heart and kidney in separate procedures at Northwestern Memorial Hospital spanning about 20 hours.

"He wouldn't have lived long if he didn't have this," said Edwin McGee Jr., surgical director of Heart Transplantation and Mechanical Assistance at Northwestern Memorial's Bluhm Cardiovascular Institute.

McGee was the surgeon who installed what actually was Coon's second new heart.

The drama during the wait for a heart and kidney and the procedures that revived Coon also became an inspiration that added significance Thursday to the dinner tables of hundreds of friends and strangers.

"It encouraged a lot of people," explained Shari Gullo, a friend of Bill's mother, Ann.

Though she had met Bill only once, Gullo said she was nudged by a divine inspiration to organize a series of "prayer pouches" for him that swelled to include more than 400 inspirational letters and messages.

"I think people became more thankful and more grateful," Gullo said. "I think everyone who took part felt it was their Thanksgiving or Christmas present - it was incredibly incredible."

You can't tell by looking at Coon, a feisty junior at Columbia College with a double major in marketing communications and radio broadcasting, that anything was ever amiss.

But that's not how his life began.

"In layman's terms, he had half a heart," his mother Ann said.

"He was given 21 days to live and on the 21st day, they found a heart in Canada."

Bill was the first infant heart transplant in the Chicago area, the fourth in the Midwest and eighth in the U.S., she said.

Aside from having to take two or three different medications and having his heart rate checked often, Coon has led a full life without complications.

He played baseball with friends, snared the lead in the high school play, "The Nerd," and joined Second City's teen ensemble. "I was never any different than anyone else," he said.

That changed last spring, when he began to experience stomach pain. He carried on but knew something was seriously wrong when he had trouble walking and began blacking out.

The pain peaked one June morning at 2 a.m. when he went into his parents bedroom, his feet and ankles swollen.

A medical test showed he was in heart failure, with 90 percent artery blockage.

"They told us not only does he need a new heart, he needs a new kidney," said Ann Coon. "Twenty years of rejection medication had burned out his kidney."

McGee, the Northwestern surgeon, said Coon had developed a coronary disease that is a common issue for people who have had heart transplants before. It's different than a typical organ rejection but doctors don't understand why it happens, he added.

Ultimately, Coon spent 70 days in intensive care before his release on Nov. 2.

During that time, Ann Coon was sending emotional and compelling e-mail updates and Gullo was fielding well wishes to forward from strangers who thought they were part of a miracle in progress.

Coon's sister Carissa, a senior at Eastern Illinois University, organized an effort to register 205 organ donors, winning the Donate Life Illinois campus challenge that included 15 schools.

"The entire community - the outpouring of support we had through this entire crisis was overwhelming," Ann Coon said.

Bill Coon takes 15 medications twice a day. That will be cut in half in six months and down to two in a year. He doesn't know who the donor was but may get the opportunity at some point. His energy and enthusiasm is tempered by the knowledge that someone died so he could live.

"It's very bittersweet," he said.

He plans to return to Columbia Jan. 25 and is writing a book to help others who find themselves in the same situation.

"He's a pretty amazing kid all the way around," McGee said.

In a lengthy update on the day her son came home, Ann Coon relayed a universal message.

"In receiving Bill's gift of life, we have witnessed firsthand the genuine compassion and faith that is so often overlooked in our friends, our family and our community."