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Columbia student waits for new heart, kidney

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Columbia student William "Bill" Coon, 20, has put a hold on his plans to return to school while he awaits a new heart and kidney.

Coon is double-majoring in radio and marketing communications and is known in both departments for being tenacious.

Coon is enthusiastic about getting involved in campus organizations such as the Public Relations Student Society of America and worked for an exclusive internship in the promotions department at 101.9 The Mix radio station.

"I didn't have him in class, but I remember I was desperate to find someone to attend a SOC [Student Organizations Council] training session for PRSSA," said Anne Marie Mitchell, assistant professor in the Marketing Communications Department. "Bill was the only one to volunteer, and he stopped by my office afterward to tell me what he had learned. I remember being so impressed by him, his energy and concern for doing the right thing."

At three weeks of age, Coon was the fourth infant in the Midwest to receive a heart transplant, and now he is in need of another one, as well as a new kidney.

Coon began to feel sick around the end of 2008 and the chest pains gradually worsened until May, when doctors discovered he was ill.

Coon had planned to return to Columbia for the fall semester, but he grew sicker and was admitted to Northwestern Memorial Hospital on Aug. 25 in need of a new heart and kidney.

"Returning to Columbia has been a goal for me since I was diagnosed in early June," Coon said. "I was hoping to return to Columbia for the first day of class this fall semester, but I needed to push that goal back a bit as I progressively grew sicker."

Currently, he's been diagnosed with vasculitis, which is a form of coronary artery disease from a transplanted heart in which the arteries start to narrow to a point that doctors cannot stent the patient if the entire artery starts to narrow.

The back of Coon's heart has shut down, with three or four arteries in the front of his heart starting to narrow.

Bill Coon's sister, Carissa Coon, a 21-year-old student at Eastern Illinois University, said her brother was recently moved to level 1A in the cardiac intensive care unit of Northwestern Memorial Hospital, putting him at the top of the list for a transplant.

"They'll have him in by next week, we're hoping," Carissa Coon said.

His family has always been close, but became especially close during the summer, Carissa Coon said.

"We're a big family and we're very close," Carissa Coon said. "I made dinner every night [this summer] so we could all have family dinners instead of doing our own thing."

Coon said with her brother in the hospital, there were days when as many as 20 visitors would be in the waiting room to visit him.

"There's always a constant flow of people and he knows that everyone's here supporting him and we're all waiting for him to get better," Coon said.

Bill Coon is encouraging family, friends and fellow students to become more involved in organ donation. His sister is working with Donate Life Illinois to begin a campaign at EIU beginning in October and lasting through mid-November.

The Radio and Marketing Communications Departments at Columbia have been especially understanding of Coon's illness and eagerly await his return next semester.

"The department is really proud of him," said Barbara Calabrese, chairwoman for the Radio Department. "We're hoping that he'll come back; he's an excellent student and he's got a bright future."

Bill Coon said he is looking forward to returning for the spring semester.

"To me, being in a classroom on the first day of second semester will be my way of knowing that I beat this illness," Bill Coon said.

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