

## **Matt Felts lives vigorously a year after transplant**

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*Published Wednesday, December 05, 2007*

A year ago, Matt Felts said getting a new heart topped his Christmas wish list.

Saturday will mark the one-year anniversary of the 2007 Rochester High School graduate undergoing a heart transplant at Methodist Hospital in Indianapolis.

“I am feeling great,” said Felts, a freshman biology major at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville who aspires to become a cardiologist.

His sister is also a student at SIUE and plans a health-related career.

Felts has undergone biopsies every three months at Methodist Hospital to check for signs of his body rejecting the new heart. He follows a heart-healthy diet, regularly checks his blood sugar, blood pressure and weight, walks 1 1/2 miles or more a day, and works out.

Another part of his daily routine is using hand cleaners and “wiping down” door knobs in his residence hall room, his phone and computer keyboards with sanitary wipes to stave off any cold or flu germs, which could aggravate Felts’ continued recovery.

“I haven’t caught a cold yet,” he said.

Felts, the son of Ronda and Jerry Felts of Springfield, spent part of his senior year at Rochester High waiting for a new heart while depending upon an electronic device to pump his blood for him. Little is known about the donor other than he was an 18-year-old from Georgia.

Felts underwent about 10 hours of surgery on Dec. 8, 2006. An electronic bi-ventricular assist device, which had been pumping his blood, was removed and the new heart was inserted.

Born with an enlarged heart, Felts had relied on pacemakers to keep his heart pumping since he was a baby. In August 2006, his pacemaker was no longer sufficient, and his heart and liver began to fail. Surgeons at Methodist Hospital attached the bi-ventricular assist device until a new heart became available.

With the transplant, Felts can look forward to living a normal life, although he will always need to take anti-rejection medicine and follow his heart-healthy regimen, his physicians have said. His heart care will include regular checkups.

Over the past year, public attention locally has focused on Felts and Jim Boehme, an art teacher at Pleasant Plains High School who underwent a heart transplant in May in St. Louis. Residents and schools have held fundraisers to help both families offset medical expenses not covered by insurance.

The next will be a quilt raffle at a Pleasant Plains basketball game Dec. 14 to help the Boehme family. The quilt, appropriately, includes hearts, according to School Superintendent Maureen Talbert, among those who helped with its quilting.

Boehme plans to return soon to his teaching job.

As the one-year anniversary of his heart transplant approaches, Felts will be completing final exams and readying for the break between fall and spring semesters.

When the opportunity arises, Felts said he may talk with other heart patients at Methodist Hospital. Many tend to be middle age or older.

“We talk about not giving up and keeping going,” he said, adding that he continues to experience the presence of what some might call a guardian angel or higher spirit.

“It’s hard to explain, but I feel it,” Felts said.

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