

DOWNNEY, Noreen (con 4)

"She was on the Jarvik for three and a half days before they could find a donor heart," said Jack Downey. "The transplant took only a little over an hour because she had been prepared, already, when the Jarvik was put in place."

Saturday, Noreen Downey celebrated the first anniversary of her "new life."

There have been only six heart patients survive having been attached to the Jarvik heart since the device was removed from medical use after Noreen's transplant.

"She was the last, in Canada, to have been on the Jarvik," says Jack. "In June, she attended a reunion with the other five (patients) in Ottawa and the Ottawa media made quite a big deal out of it. It also marked the 100th transplant at Ottawa's heart institute."

With friends and family around, Saturday, Noreen could reflect on the emotional roller coaster she has ridden over the past year.

Her biggest battle, aside from the constant threat of organ rejection — it still exists, says her husband, despite drugs to help fight rejection — and low immunity defences is against depression.

"She has literally had her life saved and changed, very radically," confides Jack Downey.

"She had been in perfect health and, in a span of less than three weeks, everything changed. That's been hard for her to accept."

The first year, after a heart transplant, "is the crucial test. But, now that we're over it, we still have to live life one day at a time. You have to live each day to its fullest."

Jack Downey marvels at the "second chance" his wife has been given.

"It's a miracle. That's what it was."

After the joyous reunion of friends and family, Noreen had a moment to reflect on the huge impact the operation has had on her life.

"The message I'm feeling is that, for all the medical technology, the biggest part of this has been the support of my family and friends," she says, quietly.

"This has changed my life and the lives of my family, but I couldn't do it without them"

Jack and Noreen Downey say their experience has given them

an almost overnight realization of the importance of organ donors and the system through which hearts and other lifesaving organ transplants are found.

"While I was in hospital, in Ottawa, there were people who lost their lives because a donor could not be found. That's hard for me to accept and we hope more people will think hard about the importance of organ donation."

Within Noreen's chest beats the heart of a 14-year-old girl who lost her life in an automobile accident.

The Downeys don't know the girl's family but Noreen secretly hopes for a day when she can thank the parents of the young girl for their incredible generosity.

"We have so many people to thank (for Noreen's second chance at life) like Dr. (Wilbert) Keon, in Ottawa, who performed the surgery. It really is overwhelming, the support everyone from nurses, doctors, family and friends have given us."

Today, Noreen still grapples with the physiological, emotional and mental changes she has undergone.

But, Jack Downey smiles, shrugs and reassures that "life goes on."

For Noreen Downey, today, life truly goes on.

"This last year has been one I would not have had, except for the support from everyone I love as family and friends."

Intell Dec 3/90