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Heart recipient bounces back

By KATE GILDERDALE
When Claremont's Jack Lamers received his new heart last June, doctors estimated he was less than a week away from death.

Four months later, it's hard to believe the healthy and relaxed 61-year-old has had a day's illness in his life.

His first two heart attacks occurred within 20 minutes of each

other in February, 1985. His wife, Christine, rushed him to Ajax-Pickering Hospital where he was revived, but his struggle to survive was just beginning.

After 15 weeks of close monitoring, Jack was pronounced healthy enough to return to work.

"He was fine for almost a whole year," recalls Christine. "Then in January, he asked to be

taken back to the hospital. Further investigation revealed he had suffered another attack of congestive heart failure.

Following tests at St. Michael's Hospital in Toronto, he returned home in May and went back to work the following month. In September, 1987, another health problem surfaced.

"Last fall we went away for about a week," remembers Christine. "We were at a wedding and he began to feel unwell. He thought at first that the food didn't agree with him."

Jack's problem turned out to be caused by gall stones, which forced him to undergo surgery.

Following his recovery from that operation, he was examined by a cardiologist at Toronto Western Hospital, who confirmed that his only hope for a normal life was a transplant.

"Just the day before Christmas he decided to have the surgery," said Christine.

His name was put on the list for a heart transplant and he returned home, where his health remained stable until April, when he had another heart attack.

Once again he was admitted to Ajax-Pickering Hospital where doctors told him his heart was failing badly. They arranged to have him transferred to the intensive care unit at Toronto

Western Hospital. "They discovered he was very sick and needed a heart quickly," Christine said.

Although Jack's case was a top priority because of his condition, it was to be weeks before a suitable donor could be found. In the meantime, the wait was almost unbearable.

"Every day I thought, 'this is the last day I'll see him,'" said Christine.

Through it all, Jack remained calm and stoic.

"He was such a cool cat, it was amazing," laughs Christine. "He was such an easy patient."

Says Jack: "It has never bothered me. From day to day we see how it goes. It's no use worrying about tomorrow."

Before his transplant could be approved, he was subjected to a strict series of tests over a 10-day period.

"He did so well they had hardly any problems," Christine noted.

The moment they prayed for came on June 26, when the hospital was alerted that a donor heart was on its way from Hamilton. Ironically, it was one of the few times Christine was not at Jack's bedside, because she was celebrating their grandson's first birthday.

When Christine finally heard the good news, she could hardly believe it. Word was received by the hospital at 2 p.m. and by 6 p.m. Jack was in the operating room.

"At nine o'clock, he asked the nurse what time it was," she says wonderingly. Jack, meanwhile, took it all in stride.

"It's not as bad as bypass or open heart surgery," he claims. "You don't have to wait to see what's inside."

The couple weren't given the name of the donor, but were told he was a young man from the Hamilton area. Their gratitude to their unknown savior and his family is tempered by the knowledge that others will not be so fortunate.

"There are 3,000 people on the list in Canada, but there just aren't enough donors," Christine laments.

Through all their troubles, Christine and Jack's neighbors and friends were a tower of strength, offering the couple both practical and emotional support.

"I really feel part of this community," says Christine. "We have found our roots here with these people."

She has praise too for the paramedics in Brougham and Claremont. "They were fantastic," she says. "They would always come when we needed them."

They encountered the same level of care and concern from the staff at Toronto Western Hospital.

"It's so friendly," smiles Christine. "Everyone was so kind and the support was terrific."

A little more than three weeks later, Jack was able to return home.

Initially, he attended the hospital clinic every Friday; now he goes down every 3 1/2 weeks.

"For us, it's a holiday not having to go all the time," says Christine, adding that regular checkups are "a small price to pay" for his renewed health.

The couple immigrated from Holland in 1953, moving to their current home 20 years ago. Their love of children led them to adopt two sons and later to become foster parents to a number of other youngsters.

Tragically, their eldest son was killed in a car accident seven years ago, but despite their setbacks, they believe they have been blessed in many ways.

They hope Jack's recovery will encourage people to discuss organ donations with their families and to carry donor cards. They point out that it's much easier for everyone if the decision to donate is made at a time when the threat of death is far away.

But for now, they both look forward to celebrating Christmas, birthdays and other special family occasions free of the fear and uncertainty that has been part of their lives for nearly four years.

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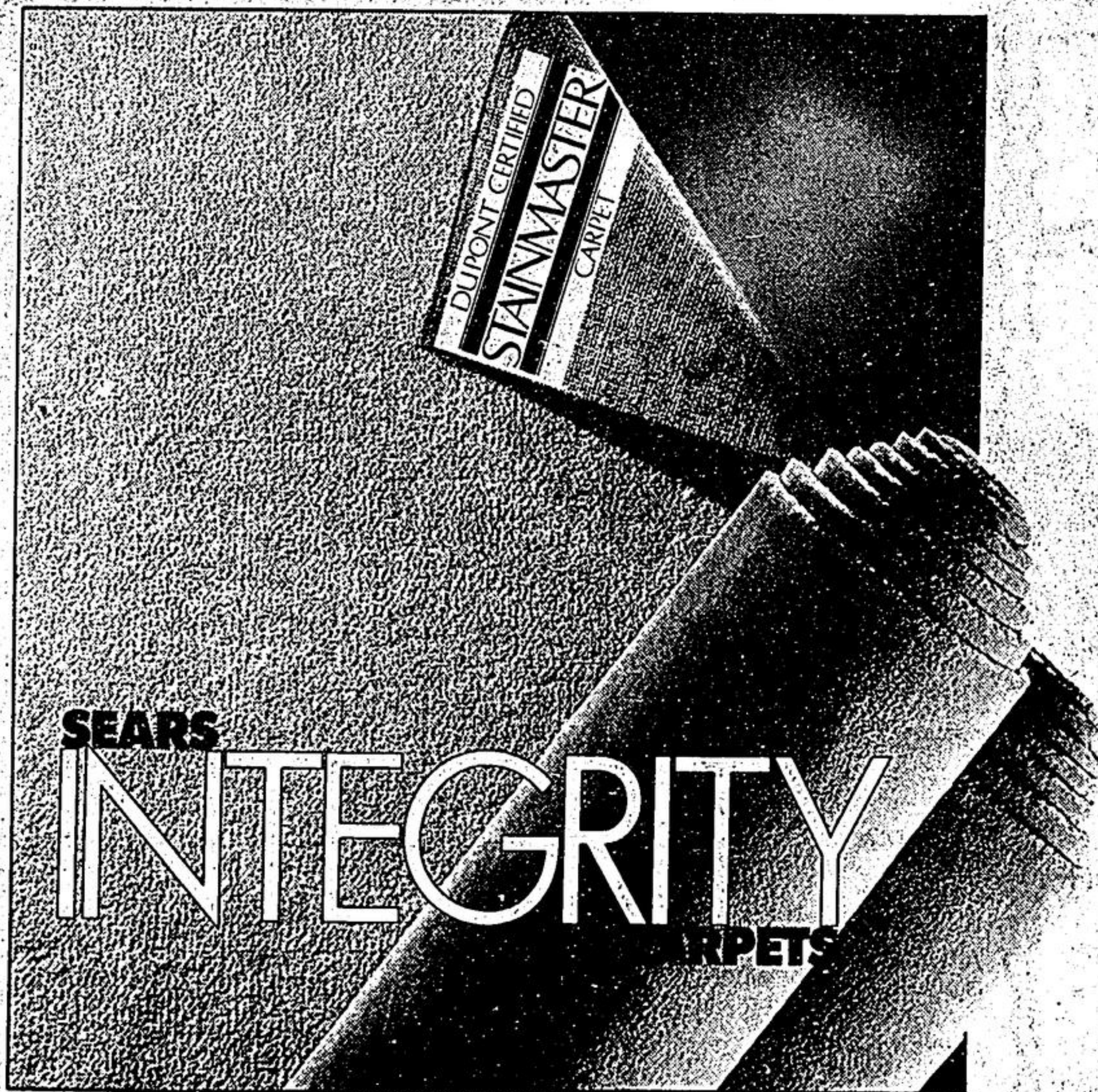
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