

# Transplant gives Griffin strength to reach 18th

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by Patrick Thomas

Turning 18 is a big event for any teenager, but for Caroline Griffin, Oct. 7 is even more special.

As the recipient of a heart transplant as an infant, Griffin is thrilled about her upcoming birthday, and she has advice for people awaiting organ transplants: it will be OK.

"It's like traveling through a dark tunnel, and at the end, there is light," she said.

Although Griffin may not remember all the dark moments of her saga over the past 18 years, her family surely does.

Her situation today is a far cry from when she was a baby. Now a talented senior golfer at Mother McAuley High School, Griffin's main concern lately is helping the Mighty Macs golf team make it to state. But when she was little, Griffin was lucky just to be alive.

Griffin was born in 1993 with a rare heart condition called endocardial fibroelastosis in which the heart does not pump strongly enough. That condition had taken the life of her older sister, Maura, who died at only three months, and years later it would be the cause of death of her father Michael at age 42.

Having lost Maura, Michael and Georgina Griffin were cautious about Caroline's health. Doctors checked on the heart of the fetus throughout the pregnancy and when she was born. Everything was fine. But four weeks after she was born, they had another check up. Things were not fine.

"She went right into intensive care. They could not believe how much her heart had deteriorated in that four-week time," Georgina said. "I couldn't believe it. When they told us Caroline had the same thing [as Maura], we knew then she was going to have to have a heart transplant. There is no surgery you can have, no medicine you could take. The only survival is transplantation."

News of the need for a heart transplant brought prayers each week at Mass from fellow parishioners at St. Barnabas Roman Catholic Church.

The prognosis for Caroline was not good. As time went on, she was given cardiac catheterization; she had to be resuscitated; she was given the Last Rites. All doctors could confirm was that the girl would be a left-hander due to the effect of oxygen loss to her brain.

Then on a snowy January day in 1994, a call came in



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from Children's Memorial Hospital that there was a heart for Caroline. For her family, it was an emotional moment filled with anxiety, uncertainty and the noise of a helicopter above the hospital with its precious cargo. There was a cooler, and in it was Caroline's new heart.

"I remember leaving her when they took her away and looking at her chest, thinking she is never going to be the same again. We heard the helicopter on the roof," Georgina said. "It was just like you see on TV. They literally have the heart in a cooler."

After the heart transplant, prayers from the community continued for a quick recovery, and parishioners even held a fundraiser to help the family.

Now as Caroline plays golf and browses through college applications to follow in the footsteps of her older sister Courtney, it seems unreal what her body went through those 18 years ago.

Caroline now tries to give back by talking to others awaiting organs or going through the transplant process. She also gives back to the Mulliganeers, an organization close to her heart because it raised money for her family shortly after her father, a marathon runner, died unexpectedly of the same heart condition.

The Mulliganeers, an area non-profit organization dedicated to raising funds for children and families in need, prides itself on giving kids a second chance.

Caroline realizes the second chance she received, but she still just wants to be viewed like any other teen.

"I look at myself as any other kid," she said. "My classmates don't look at me like I came through all of this. They look at me just like they look at themselves. When I tell people [about the heart transplant], they are shocked. I don't want to be looked at as someone who went through all this."

Despite the obstacles, Caroline's family is eternally grateful for the opportunity she received. With all the types of illnesses that doctors deal with at Children's Memorial, Georgina was thankful that Caroline's could at least be overcome.

"We had an answer. We had a heart," Georgina said. "There are some diseases out there that there are no answers for."

Caroline's being able to overcome her condition was due in large part to her sister Maura.

"I always think we are all here for a reason," Georgina said. "Even though Maura was only here for three months, she was here for a reason because she saved her sister's life. If we had never known about her problem, we would never have known about Caroline's."

But while Caroline may look like any other teen, her life is anything but ordinary.

Every 18 months, she undergoes a biopsy. The hard part, she said, is that after the procedure she has to lie flat for six hours during recovery to avoid blood clots. She has blood drawn every few months and has frequent check-ups and tests at Children's Memorial. On top of that, she has taken 10-12 pills a day her whole life, and although her heart is healthy, her immune system is suppressed. She is susceptible to infection. She has had shingles, whooping cough and strep throat more times than she cares to remember.

Her assistant golf coach at McAuley can understand that condition. Bob Smith underwent a kidney transplant five years ago after a tumor was discovered. He knows that organ recipients have health concerns and tire more easily. But when onlookers see Griffin carrying her golf bag for 18 holes, they notice nothing unusual, Smith said.

"It doesn't affect her. It doesn't slow her down," he said. "She's one of the greatest kids I have ever coached. She would do anything you would ask of her. If she doesn't get in a match, she understands. She is not a pouter or a whiner. But she is the first kid on the range and last one to leave."

Griffin began playing golf in seventh grade with her cousins and uncles in Michigan, and she attended golf camps at McAuley. By high school, she went from being a freshman not playing in any matches to competing in the Girls Catholic Athletic Conference (GCAC) and shooting a 96, finishing tied for fourth on the junior varsity level. This year she shot a 40 on a 9-hole outing and shot a personal best 89 in a recent round of 18.

"I think she loves sports, and golf has been great game for her. Now she is watching it on TV," said her mother.

Head Coach Michele Stepanek said players often complain about being tired after carrying their clubs for 18 holes, but that is never the case with Caroline.

"She puts 110 percent into practices and matches, and she really works hard to improve her game. She is a great person to be around. She is very positive and very respectful. I can go on and on about this girl," Stepanek said.

Caroline plays 18 holes each weekend and practices every day after school when she is not in a match.

"McAuley is my second home around golf season," Griffin said. "I'm at school around golf season from 7:30 to 3, and then I have to go to the [Meadows Golf Club of Blue Island] for practice, and sometimes when we have a match I don't get home



until 8:30 or 9 o'clock. I'm home for an hour, and I have to go to bed. So, McAuley is my life."

The 9-1 Mighty Macs, led by senior captains Anne Best and Michelle Dempster, finished the regular season on Oct. 3, after press time, before setting off for regional tournament play on Oct. 5 at Green Garden Country Club in Frankfort.

Caroline is not expected to make the final cut for match play, but there is a good chance she will one day be playing even more important rounds of golf on a healthy heart.

"Some day," Smith said, "she is going to be a mom out there playing golf with her kids."

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