



YOUNG AT HEART

Luca Vugrač from Croatia was 13 years old when suddenly everything went black

■ **I STILL REMEMBER** that day as if it were yesterday. It was November 8, 2007. I was always a hyperactive boy, a good athlete, an excellent student with a pale face. That day I was as white as a sheet, I felt weak, everything around me became black and the air barely got to my lungs. That was the first time I ended up in hospital. It was then that I realized I may not be quite as healthy as I thought I was.

The doctors in Čakovec weren't able to diagnose me correctly for three days. Once they realized what was wrong with me, I was rushed to Zagreb. And then – shock.

I almost died Get this: an athlete, 13 years old, with a heart disease. I couldn't believe it. I remember the first thing I asked the doctor after he told me that my heart was weak and that I would need a heart transplant: "Doctor, tell me honestly, what are my chances of survival?" At first, the doctor was shocked that I would ask him that, but then he said: "Look, the transplantation itself has a 95% success rate."

But what he didn't say was that first you have to survive until the transplantation. I realized this one night when I almost died because my heart rate jumped to 300 beats per minute, and I had to be resuscitated with a defibrillator. And so that year I spent my birthday, Christmas and New Year in hospital, only to be released without transplantation.

"Under enormous scrutiny" I was still sick, and my heart was so weak that I could barely climb the stairs. But I desperately wanted to function normally. It wasn't easy to give up the sports I was addicted to, or other basic physical activities just to be able to function normally. But I got used to it, and I lived "under enormous scrutiny" from 2007 to 2011.

This lasted until 2011, when I ended up back in the hospital as my condition rapidly deteriorated. At one point my heart stopped and I was kept in an induced coma on ECMO life support for six days. The machine replaced the functions of my heart and lungs. And you already know what followed next: the inevitable – heart transplantation. I was apprehensive at the

thought of transplantation and especially terrified by the idea of ending up in that 5% of unfortunate cases. When I woke up I didn't believe that I was a transplant recipient. But it certainly felt easier to breathe and when they told me that my heart was pumping normally it was music to my ears.

I spent nearly two months in hospital after the operation and every day was a struggle with my mental and physical condition. I think I drove my parents completely crazy.

It was so hard to get back on my feet after everything, after my muscles had nearly atrophied. I also had to come to terms with the fact that I was still in hospital and not with my classmates at school.

As soon as I got home my condition improved. When I finally walked around my neighbourhood for the first time it was a joy – except for the strange looks from passers-by because I was wearing a protective mask. I grew both mentally and physically and got stronger every day.

Back to school Four months after the operation I returned to school. I took exams from two years all at once, went to competitions, won third place in the country and achieved more and better results each day.

After the transplantation, my cerebral blood flow improved, so I passed both the third and the fourth grades without any problems. After graduation, all doors were wide open for me. I had a direct entry into various further education faculties thanks to all the prizes I had won during high school. I also had the opportunity to work: so, I decided to work.

Living life to the max I am now 19 and I own a company which develops mobile applications, websites and does marketing. I am still achieving my goals and setting new ones, my life is better than ever. I went back to sports, and I live my life to its maximum.

The disease certainly changed me. I have become more serious, sometimes too serious. But I have also become more sensitive and caring. And most importantly, I have become a better person. 🙌

► **Luca Vugrač** with class at the National youth campaign on organ donation and transplantation in Split, May 2014

