



Staten Island Advance

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New heart, new lease on life for Staten Island man



Andrew LaGuardia/Westchester Medical Center

Robert Soto, 59, of Huguenot, flashes a thumbs up as he recovers from a heart transplant in Westchester Medical Center, Valhalla, N.Y.

A resident of Staten Island's [Huguenot](#) neighborhood spent his Thanksgiving in an upstate hospital bed, without his family or friends or the usual holiday fare.

But he received something precious for which to be thankful: A new heart.

A week after a successful organ transplant at [Westchester Medical Center](#) in Valhalla, N.Y., Robert Soto, 59, said he was ready to start all over again. His new lease on life comes courtesy a 20-year-old man he will never be able to thank in person.

"Now that I have a 20-year-old heart, I am going to live 50 more years," Soto said in a phone interview from his hospital today, where his wife and family brought his Thanksgiving meal to him.

"I was given a second chance, and I'm going to take advantage of every minute of it," he added.

Actually, his surgery last Tuesday could be counted as a fourth chance on life for Soto. The U.S. Marine Corps veteran was nearly killed 40 years ago in Vietnam, when an ammunition dump exploded, sending shrapnel through his back and arm.

He had another brush with death on Sept. 11, 2001, when he worked as a data analyst for an insurance company on the 54th floor of Tower II.

Soto said his experiences prepared him for what he was to face, when doctors told him he had congestive heart failure a year later. After first they tried medications, but his condition eventually worsened. He was admitted to the hospital this September and placed on the highest priority donor list, where he waited for weeks for a suitable donor.

At any given time, there are more than 100,000 people - about 7,000 of them are from the greater New York metro area - waiting for life-saving organ transplants, according to the [New York Organ Donor Network](#). Some wait for years. Many never get one.

"There are 5 million people that have the same diagnosis as Mr. Soto, and about 2,500 people receive heart transplants. Each year, thousands of people die waiting for a donor," said Dr. Warren Rosenblum, director of heart failure and transplantation at Westchester Medical Center who who is Soto's cardiologist.

Soto's recovery plan includes six months of rest, ensuring he gives his body time to acclimate to his new heart. After that, he hopes to go back to work. He also plans to volunteer as an advocate for organ donors, and join the organ donor support group at the Westchester hospital. There, he'll be able to comfort patients the same way he was comforted while awaiting surgery.

But before he does anything else, he said he needs to do something that will be even more difficult than facing his own death: Writing a letter that will be forwarded to the family of the man who saved his life.

"I don't even know what to say. How do you thank someone for their heart?" Soto said.

-- Reported by Peter N. Spencer