Living For 2: 'Nightline' Returns To Mayo Clinic Organ Transplant Unit

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It was just more than a year ago when we touched down in Rochester, Minn. to do a story on the organ transplant unit at Mayo Clinic [1]. Before we could even check our camera mics, we got word that another plane had just landed carrying a red cooler containing a liver for 60-year-old Gordon Karels

It's the moment more than 100,000 people in the United States are waiting for. Eighteen of them die each day waiting for their organ transplant, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [2].

For some, getting a new, healthy organ can happen overnight. For most, the wait is much longer. Sometimes it can take years.

With the cooler in the doctor's hand, we rushed to the hospital to film its arrival and subsequent journey through the winding corridors to the operating room. After his successful transplant and rapid recovery in the days to follow, Karels and his family celebrated.

Also in the hospital was Jessica Danielson, then 30 years old, who was waiting for a heart and liver. At age 19, Danielson was diagnosed with restrictive cardiomyopathy, a rare condition that leads to congestive heart failure and damages the liver.

Doctors told her that she would either have a heart attack or die from the disease within three years. More than 10 years later, Danielson was still waiting for her double transplant.

Danielson was attached to her IV pump at all times. She had nicknamed it Wilson.

"He's keeping me going," she said last April. "He's pumping medications directly into my heart."

Back then, Danielson said, "I don't think death is in the cards for me, I have way too much to do and I'm doing everything I can to stay strong."

Six weeks later, Danielson finally got a new heart and liver. Her recovery took some months living in Rochester, Minn., at the Gift of Life House, where she had to get used to her new organs.

"I remember the first time I went up an incline in Rochester, and I got to the top of it and teared up," she said. "I'm still in awe of it every day. Carrying the laundry up the stairs -- before it was the hardest thing to do. Now it's just so easy. ... I'm like a

normal person now."

"It's a very cool feeling -- hard to explain to someone who has always had a healthy heart -- but it's like magic," Danielson said. "I don't take anything for granted anymore."

Three months after her surgery, Jessica finally went home to Duluth, Minn. "Nightline" caught up with her there last week, shortly after her one-year anniversary of getting her new organs.

Danielson's thicker, curlier hair and healthy coloring made it hard to believe she was the same person we met a year ago in a hospital gown.

Back then, she was pushing her IV pump down the hallway. Last week, she was pushing a shopping cart at the grocery store buying some food for a barbecue with friends.

"I should buy guacamole. It's my favorite thing!" she said.

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