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Tim Pfeifer got new lungs in a September surgery.

TRANSPLANT GIVES GRAD A NEW START

BY LYNN LA | lla@sacbee.com

Tim Pfeifer has every reason to complain.

When he was 2, he was diagnosed with cystic fibrosis, a genetic disorder that causes his body to produce thick mucus in his lungs and leads to chronic respiratory infection.

Now, at 18, he's had more than a dozen surgical procedures. During his junior year at Christian Brothers High School, he caught the H1N1 virus — which, according to his father, Jim Pfeifer, “almost did him in.”

Tim Pfeifer takes 50 pills a day, every day, and will continue to do so for the rest of his life.

To complain about all this would have been a waste of his breath; breath that didn't come too easily for him before his double lung transplant in September at Lucile Packard Children's Hospital at

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“When you have a child that started the year at 13 percent lung function, you go in knowing that he may not finish the year because he may not be around. Without that lung transplant, he would not have graduated high school. We would be talking about him in the past tense.” — JIM PFEIFER



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Tim Pfeifer, right, jokes with his mother, Ellie, at home in Elk Grove. The 18-year-old, who got an ovation from his Christian Brothers High School classmates at graduation last month, next plans to study accounting at Sacramento State, which could prove useful in a business he started with his father. He also wants to get a summer job and move out on his own.

Transplant: Teen wants to be independent and contribute

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Stanford.

“It was basically like taking one of those little coffee stirrer straws, and trying to breathe through that,” said Pfeifer, describing what it felt like to breathe before the surgery.

At school he carried an oxygen tank, and he had trouble climbing stairs and walking to classes. But when moving from his room to the living room couch became too difficult, Pfeifer and his family began to consider a lung transplant.

A year later, he finally received a pair. “At the time I woke up from that transplant, they had me intubated on a breathing machine,” he said. “I remember taking my first breath. It was like when you hold your breath underwater and you come up and you take that big gasp of air. It was just amazing.”

His parents remain grateful to his donor, a student from Modesto Christian School, without whose decision to be an organ donor, their son would not be alive today.

“When you have a child that started the year at 13 percent lung function, you go in knowing that he may not finish the year because he may not be around,” said his father. “Without that lung transplant, he would not have graduated high school. We would be talking about him in the past tense.”

Graduating from high school was all Pfeifer ever wanted. When the Make-A-Wish Foundation approached him, the only thing he wished for was to finish school. When he emailed his teachers, it was to ask about the schoolwork he needed to do to finish school. And when he received a standing ovation last month while getting his diploma, it was because he finally finished school.

“When I went across that stage and my whole

class was standing and applauding for me, it was quite amazing,” he said. “It just felt like all that hard work paid off. It was pretty awesome.”

One of his teachers, Holly Peterson, was at the ceremony and described the scene as electric.

“The students went right up on their feet, there was no hesitation,” said Peterson. “There was no, ‘Should we stand up? Should we not stand up?’ It was clear admiration for him.”

For Pfeifer, however, graduating is only the beginning. He is in the midst of more health problems. Due to the surgery, he now has diabetes, and because of the immunosuppressant drugs he is taking to keep his body from rejecting the new organ, he has developed a type of cancer known as post-transplant lymphoproliferative disease. Maintaining a standard of normality is his priority.

He will go to Sacramento State and plans to go into accounting, a useful skill that will help with the barbecue pit-selling business he started with his father. He has a driver's license, plays “Call of Duty,” and relishes his high-calorie diet of pizza and hamburgers.

Much to his parents' dismay, he wants to find a summer job to save money to move out.

Pfeifer said he does all this so he can stand on his own two feet. He wants to contribute to the people around him and doesn't like to be coddled. He also doesn't spend time coddling others.

When his mother, Ellie, asked him if there was anything he wanted to tell her before going into transplant surgery in case something were to happen, Pfeifer refused to accept any negative thoughts.

Recalling the conversation, he chuckled. “I told her, ‘No. There will be no confessions here.’”

Call The Bee's Lynn La, (916) 321-1086.



Holding medications in one hand, Tim Pfeifer throws a toy for his dogs. He faces more health problems since his lung transplant: diabetes and — because of the anti-rejection drugs he takes — a type of cancer known as post-transplant lymphoproliferative disease.

TRANSPLANT GIVES GRAD A NEW START by Lynn La

This was the first story I did during my fellowship and I was very nervous. A reader emailed us saying that she had attended this kid, Tim Pfeifer's, graduation. She said the standing ovation was incredibly moving and thought it would be interesting if we could write about him. I contacted the tipster, and we got the family's permission to come over and conduct an interview and take pictures. To be granted this sort of access and ask questions about someone's personal medical issues was daunting, but I was motivated to get Tim's story as accurate as I could. His story was extremely moving and inspiring. The strength this kid had was unbelievable and I felt a lot of people could benefit from reading about his story as well.

What's more is that the photographer who was assigned this story is Pulitzer Prize winner Renée C. Byer. I was a fan of her work beforehand and to work along side her was a great experience. We went to the Pfeifer residence, conducted a two to three hour interview, and I wrote it for print a few days later. I got a lot of emails from readers saying they read and liked the story and I was just glad people were able to connect with Tim.

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