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Mesa dancer, 21, waits for new heart

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Image courtesy of Mia Welch

Mia Welch

Mia Welch, a 21-year-old Mesa resident, plays a dance video game at the Mayo Clinic Hospital after her surgery to equip her with an artificial heart last November

Posted: Monday, March 12, 2012 6:54 am | Updated: 9:51 am, Fri May 4, 2012.

By Stacie Spring, Tribune | 0 comments

"Waiting. For now, I'm just waiting," says 21-year-old Mesa resident, Mia Welch.

Pictures of grinning family and friends and photos of Welch in mid-leap line the walls of her room. Welch, tucked beneath a purple coverlet, smiles. A backpack sits in a chair next to the bed. Toiletries line the cabinet near the sink and a recliner with a blanket folded neatly sits in the corner of the room. Except for small details like the hospital bed, the handrails in the bathroom and a constant humming and thumping, it could nearly be mistaken for a college dorm room.

Except the room is in Phoenix's Mayo Clinic Hospital and the constant thumping emanating from the backpack holds a device currently acting as Welch's heart.

Congestive heart failure is not something commonly associated with young, otherwise healthy dancers, but here sits Mia Welch, waiting; she's waiting for a heart.

Heartfelt

The Mesa Community College Dance Company's Spring 2012 formal performance, entitled "Heartfelt," will be dedicated to Welch, a 2008 graduate of McClintock High School, with the proceeds to go to the Mia A. Welch donation fund to help assist with her medical expenses.

The performance will include a mixture of jazz, tap, ballet, modern, hip hop and more to songs with a theme of "heart," said Tina Rangel, the company director and Welch's former dance instructor. The company will perform to songs such as "Eat Your Heart Out" and "Listen to Your Heart."

"Mia is just naturally talented," Rangel said. "Some people just have the talent for it."

More Information

Tickets for the MCC dance company's March 22-24 "Heartfelt" performances start at \$9, and can be bought in person at the Theatre Outback at MCC (located at 1833 W. Southern Ave., Mesa), by phone at (480) 461-7172, or online at www.ezicketlive.com/mcc. All performances begin at 7:30.

The need for organ donors is high. Thousands of people each day are waiting for organ donations. To find out more about becoming an organ donor or to register to become a donor, visit www.organdonor.gov.

Welch didn't start dancing until she started high school, quickly advancing to a high level — one that takes most dancers a decade or more to accomplish — in just a few short years.

Welch earned a spot on Mesa Community College's dance company for the 2010 summer, but at a performance at the end of the summer, something strange happened.

"I was doing a jump, like a switch leap, but with an arch-back," Welch said. The leap knocked the wind out of her and the performance left her tired and unable to breathe normally, she said.

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She went to an emergency room, but after being told that "emergency rooms were for life and death situations," she let it go.

"I thought maybe I pulled a muscle in my ribs or something," Welch said. As a dancer, pulling a muscle isn't something unusual.

Pain

Over the course of the following weeks, Welch gradually became unable to participate in dance class. Yoga made her legs go numb; dance left her unable to breathe; walking made her sweat like she had run for miles.

Eventually, it entered her personal life. One day she couldn't keep up with her sister and niece at the store. Another day she couldn't sing along to the radio with her friends.

Underlying it all, she still had a constant pain on the right side of her ribcage, Welch said holding her side as she remembered.

"On Sept. 20th, at 5 or 6 p.m. — its funny how you remember things — the pain was so bad," Welch said. She went to the emergency room, a different one this time.

Initially, the doctor thought it might be problems with her gallbladder, she recalled. But a CAT scan showed she had an enlarged heart.

A week's stay at the hospital tried to determine if the enlargement had been there all along or if it had a more recent cause.

"When the doctor pulled the chair up, I knew it was bad," Welch said. "He said, 'You have congestive heart failure,' and my whole world felt like it flipped over."

Failure

"My mom was a registered nurse and she said she should have put it all the signs together," Welch said shaking her head in disagreement. "But I'm young; no one thought I was going into heart failure."

While it's unknown exactly what happened, doctors believe that a virus attacked her heart. By the time Welch ended up in the hospital, the virus was gone, leaving only her damaged heart.

Over the next nine months, doctors hoped a regimen of medications and time would allow Welch's heart to heal on its own. After all, she was young and active, Welch said.

After going in and out of the hospital about once a month, Welch was admitted into the hospital on Oct. 13, she said. Her heart wasn't able to pump enough blood.

"The doctors couldn't believe I was even walking," she said. Tests showed she was only getting sicker, and much of this part of her life is hazy, she said.

Welch kept a journal, recording her daily events and thoughts. It is through this journal that she learns about a lot of her time before the surgery; there is much that Welch doesn't remember writing.

During her second night in the ICU, she wrote that she didn't like sleeping alone.

"I can receive a heart at anytime," she read from her journal. But it was during this time that she also grew in her faith. Her entry concludes, "Thank you, Father. I love you."

She added: "He knows I'm strong enough to fight it or I wouldn't be in this situation ... Life means a totally different thing than it was before."

Eventually, the doctor gave Welch's mother a choice: either Mia needed a heart by the next day or they needed to put an artificial heart in, Welch said. Her heart couldn't support her anymore.

Chance

On Nov. 1, Welch underwent the surgery at Mayo to remove her heart and replace it with an artificial one.

First, she was hooked by tubes from her abdomen to a machine called "Big Blue," which weighed over 400 pounds.

Now on a different machine, she can cart her device around in a relatively inconspicuous, 15-pound backpack.

For now, she stays at the Mayo Clinic Hospital waiting for a heart.

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"How can I pray for a heart when I know it's someone else's heart?" she asks. And while she struggles with knowing that when she receives a heart, she'll be taking someone else's, it's something she puts to faith.

"I feel blessed because this has made me a better person," she said. The situation, she said, has made her closer to her family and made her become a better, more introspective person.

Welch is planning on attending the performance and hopes that eventually she'll be onstage too.

"I will be able to. I know it. I'll be dancing again," she said.

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