

A Heart Moving Story

It was a slow, boiling Saturday afternoon in Cape Town on the 2nd of December, 1967.

Destiny, though, had apparently determined that this was not going to be an ordinary weekend in the Cape Peninsula. When it was over, the world would no longer be quite the same.

There are three heroes in this story... Christian Bernard, the surgeon who dared, the courage of the recipient, Louis Washkansky, and the generosity of the donor's father, Edward Durvall. And of course there is the memory of the young donor herself- Denise Durvall.

Christian Bernard was born in 1922 in South Africa. He came from a poor family and his father was a preacher. There were four boys and Chris and his brother Marius both studied medicine. Chris obtained his medical degree, then went to the States for further study and worked with a professor in the area of heart research. He returned to S.A. with the gift of a heart - lung machine and a grant of money. He returned to work at Groote Schuur Hospital in Cape Town and the heart unit was set up. After much research on organ transplant, Chris and his brother started doing heart transplants on dogs from the pound. They did this in a small theatre at night with a black man to help.

In 1967 he carried out the first kidney transplant successfully, only the second one in S.A. His patient was doing well. Christian Bernard was 45 years old.

Louis Washkansky was a 53 year old man, suffering from a terminal medical condition caused by severe heart disease. His doctor referred him to Dr. Bernard who after carrying out a number of tests informed Louis there was nothing that could be done for him. He would not have long to live.

But Louis refused to die. The staff loved him, he was always smiling and looking on the bright side. But he was very ill.

In July 1967 the hospital gave Dr Bernard the all clear for a heart transplant. It was decided that only a patient with no chance of being cured could be considered for a transplant.

Dr. Bernard asked Louis if he was willing to take a chance. Louis knew he

was as good as dead anyway, so agreed. He wanted to spend more time with his wife Anne. So the team began to prepare Louis for what may come. This was in July 1967.

25 year old, Denise Ann Darvall, was a bank clerk, who was kind and generous. She loved music and fashion design. He had two brothers. One older and one younger, she had recently bought her first car, and loved driving it, showing her independence.

The scene was set, the story unfolded.

Soon after 3 pm on Saturday 2nd of December, the Darvalls were on their way to a friends house for afternoon tea. Denise was driving and her 13 year old brother was beside her. Her parents were in the back seat.

On the way Denise, known to her friends as Denny, wanted to buy a caramel cake from her favorite bakery to take with them. Spotting the bakery ahead on the opposite side of the road, Denise pulled over and she and her mother went across to the bakery. They were only gone for a few minutes but it seemed ages for the two in the car.

Driving in the opposite direction, was a 36 year old salesman. He had been drinking before he got behind the wheel. He was singing to the new hit by the Monkees" Daydream Believer" he started to speed up as the traffic had eased. His senses were dulled by alcohol.

At that moment Denise and her mother stepped onto the road, Denise was carrying the cake in her hands. He didn't even brake.

Denise's mother Myrtle was killed instantly. As Denise had landed her head had hit the hubcap of a parked car. Her skull had been fractured badly, as well as this she sustained many other injuries.

Mr. Darvall and his son ran to them.

A doctor came running because of the bang and screaming. An ambulance was on its way. It was 3.40 pm.

Police were directing traffic.

Anne Washkansky and her sister in law were returning from visiting her husband Louis and saw the accident and the young woman lying bleeding on the road. They were horrified.

They had just been informed that Louis had maybe a week to live.

Little did Ann know but Denise's heart would be keeping her husband alive in a matter of hours.

On arrival at the hospital, the doctors started working on Denise. Her father, who had accompanied them in the ambulance, was told that Denise's head injuries were so severe that she was brain dead, and could not recover.

Mr. Darvall was informed that her heart was still beating, and there was something he could do to bring meaning to his daughter's state.

He was told about Louis, and about Dr. Bernard who was read to carry out a transplant. The first of its kind. They asked him for permission to donate his daughter's heart to Louis and also one of her kidneys to a young boy who was waiting for a transplant.

Here was a man who had just lost his wife and his daughter. Now the doctors were asking him for her heart. He thought about his daughter and what she would have wanted.

He took 4 minutes to make his decision. He said.. " If you can't save my daughter, try to save this man and boy instead"

The Doctor called Chris Bernard immediately and told him of the events. Everything moved very quickly after that. Chris called in the whole team 40 in total, including his brother Marius.

The operation began at 12.55 am on Sunday.

The two theatres were side by side. Marius operated on Denise in one theatre and Chris operated on Louis in the other. When the time was right Denise's heart was carried into Dr Bernard.

The operation finished at just before 6 am.

The first human to human heart transplant had been performed.

They did not expect Louis to survive more than a day or two.

Amazingly he survived 18 days, not because his body rejected his new heart, but because he contracted pneumonia. The anti rejection drugs had destroyed his immune system.

Of course word of the transplant got out within a day of the operation. The world went crazy. Christian Bernard became a celebrity.

He went on to do many more heart transplants, but also travelled the world and its social scene.

Christian Bernard had two sides, as much as he was a dedicated doctor and brilliant surgeon, he had the reputation of being very difficult to work for. He would often scream at staff and throw things in the operating theatre.

He was also a womanizer. He was married three times and had 2 children to each marriage.

His first was 4 years younger than him, his second wife 20 years younger and he married his third wife when he was 60, she has just turned 19. He died alone, and actually died from an acute asthma attack. He was 79 years old.

This was an incredible story, for me not only the heart transplant itself, but the extraordinary chain of events leading up to the operation.

The hospital tour was amazing. There was only Kym, Pam and myself and we were taken into the theatres where the operations took place.

Everything was exactly as it was on the night. Same equipment, and the characters were made of silicone, and so lifelike.

There was no air conditioning in the hospital back then, so wax figures could not be used. They were sculptured by the artists from Madame Tousades. Extremely lifelike!!

There was even a recreation of Denise's bedroom, with her personal things as well as Louis' hospital room and Christian Bernard's office.

Notice in the photos that the doctors were not afforded the luxury of microscopic tools that are used today. Everything was done just using their eyesight.

I could really just continue, but would never stop.

Last facts.

Denise's father passed away one year after his wife and daughter lost their lives. Neither of his sons ever married and continue to live alone.

The driver of the car was given 12 years in prison and served 8. He wrote to the Darvalls every year apologising for his actions, but they never responded.

There are roughly 5000 transplants carried out each year worldwide.

At the moment Australia hold the record for the longest living heart recipient, Fiona Coote. Remember, she received her heart as a 14 year old in 1984.

Unfortunately there are still not enough organ donors. In 2014 in Australia the statistics were as follows.

1600 people waiting for organs

378 organ donors

1117 recipients, 79 of these received hearts.

Groote Schuur hospital in Cape Town.

Dr.Christian Bernard at his desk

The scene of the accident

The operation

Louis waiting for surgery







