

Heart-warming *tale*

Archbishop Wood swimmer Kyle
Atras won't let a heart transplant
keep him from competing.

By KAREN SANGILLO
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WARMINSTER — Archbishop Wood swimmer Kyle Atras was just 8½ months old when he had the most traumatic experience of his life.

He had a heart transplant.

Atras was diagnosed with a dilated cardiomyopathy (an enlarged heart) at the age of 3 months at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia.

"At that time, they did not have a license to do transplants, and St. Christopher's had a license but no surgeon," said Atras, a Willow Grove resident, who is a sophomore at Wood. "So we had to go out of town. We chose to go to Johns Hopkins in Baltimore."

He received the transplant on Oct. 21, 1989, and it's been a life of check-ups ever since.

"I go every three months to make sure everything's fine," he said.

He was fine for awhile, but

suffered from post transplant lympho disorder, or PTLTD, a type of lymphoma caused by his medication.

"It leaves your immune system depressed," he said. "So, we lowered the dosage of the medicine, but now I have to go to the doctor more frequently."

This summer, Atras experienced some more problems associated with his medications and was in and out of Children's Hospital all summer after passing out in church on July 4.

"There's only three types of medicine for heart transplants and I've been on all three of them," he said. "We went down to Hopkins and got some tests. They said everything was fine, but when we got back to Children's, they said that with some of my numbers, Hopkins shouldn't have sent me home. I could have gone into heart failure at any time, so I feel very lucky."

Despite the challenges of his health, Atras was determined to remain on the swim team.

"Swimming helps me get in shape and stay in shape," he said. "I started swimming when I was 4 years old. It's something I've been doing all my life. It's hard to part with something like that."

"I thought about not coming out for the team this year, but I thought it would be a good thing for me to do. It gives me something to focus on, something to work at."

Atras used to play ice hockey, but gave it up.

"My size made that difficult to continue, so I'll watch it, but I don't play," he said. "That's what made keeping swimming so important. It's something that you can do at any size, at any age."

Atras swims during the sum-

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mer at the Naval Air Station in Willow Grove.

"I was used to summer swimming, so last year high school was a big adjustment," he said. "The practices are a lot harder. I swam a lot of unofficial races for Wood last year, but we had a lot of upperclassmen that were better swimmers, and they should have been swimming ahead of me. My turn will come."

Some of his classmates were unaware of his condition.

"I have to be careful of getting sick, so one of my math teachers told the class that if they were sick, they had to move away because someone had a heart transplant and everyone was look-

ing around, wondering who it was," he said. "I'd been in school with them for a year. I do everything everyone else my age does. They don't even notice."

"When I was in kindergarten, they told the teacher that there was a sick kid in the class, but not who it was. She tried to guess, and guessed wrong."

Atras isn't seriously looking at colleges yet, but would like to major in radio and television.

"I have so many options, and as a sophomore, I still have plenty of time to look around, so I'm having fun with that," he said.

This past summer, Atras participated in the U.S. Transplant Games, an Olympic-style athletic competition for

people with transplants, at the University of Minnesota. He competed in swimming, bowling, basketball and volleyball.

"That was a lot of fun," he said.

Wood swim coach Charlie Stillwell enjoys having Atras on the team.

"He's a great kid," he said. "He loves swimming and the kids really like him a lot."

"He doesn't hesitate. I can put him in anything and he just goes right out there and gives it his best. He comes to all the functions and does everything the others do. I think he just really likes being a part of the team."

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