At just 18 years old, Megan Gagliardi was told she might die from a rare genetic heart condition. Now, thanks in part to UAB Medicine’s Comprehensive Transplant Institute (CTI), she is celebrating her recent engagement and an important six-year anniversary--; all as the University of Alabama at Birmingham celebrates 50 years of transplant success.

Gagliardi and her family moved from Memphis, Tennessee, to Birmingham in 2010 during her senior year of high school. She says it was difficult to move to a school where she knew no one, and when she started experiencing health issues, she ignored them because she was focused on making it through the school year.

“I noticed I wasn’t feeling like myself,” Gagliardi said. “I would go to bed at night, and it just felt like there was a pressure in my chest. I had this constant cough that never went away; but it was the end of the school year, so I just tried to push through. After graduation, I told my mom how ill I felt. My mom decided she wanted to take me to the hospital, so they ran a whole bunch of scans, test and panels. They noticed there was a ton of fluid in my chest.”

Gagliardi says UAB Medicine’s Emergency Medicine care team wasn’t sure what was causing the fluid buildup, so they gave her a diuretic.

“The next morning, I woke up 15 pounds lighter,” she said. “I had lost 15 pounds of fluid during the night. They did another scan, and that’s when I was diagnosed with dilated cardiomyopathy.”

Dilated cardiomyopathy is a disease of the muscle of the heart that results in an enlarged heart with thin walls and a large pumping chamber. Dilated cardiomyopathy has many potential causes, including heart attacks, heart valve disease, high blood pressure, infections and drugs toxic to the heart.

The news came as a surprise since she hadn’t had heart issues prior to the diagnosis. But Gagliardi says she felt she was in good hands once she was put under the care of Salpy Pamboukian, M.D., Jose Tallaj, M.D., and James Kirklin, M.D., at UAB Medicine’s Heart and Vascular Clinic.

“I was 18 years old, and getting that kind of news was a big shock,” she said. “I wasn’t really sure what to think. That day when I was at the hospital, they told me I would eventually need a heart transplant or I wouldn’t make it. Again, to get that news at 18, that’s just something that throws you into shock, and you worry. But I knew, being at UAB Medicine, I would have great doctors to take care of me.”

A Special Birthday Present

Gagliardi immediately was placed on the heart transplant waiting list,
joining more than 3,900 others in the United States. She says she didn’t let the diagnosis keep her from living her life.

“I was diagnosed in June, and that August I decided to start college,” she said. “I didn’t really tell anyone that I had an issue. I didn’t want anyone to look at me as the sick girl or the girl that had a heart issue, so I kind of kept that secret for a while. Eventually, I told my closest friends that I had heart issues. I told them I couldn’t keep up or always take the stairs or do the same activities. That was tough.”

Gagliardi says the support she received from her transplant coordinators helped her overcome those social challenges. Then, the night before her 19th birthday, she received a call that would change her life forever.

“I received my heart transplant on my 19th birthday,” Gagliardi said. “It’s the best birthday present I’ll ever get. By the time I received the transplant, I just remember feeling so grateful. The night we went in for the transplant, my whole family was around me and praying. I remember everyone around me crying, and at the same time, I was thinking, ‘I’m so excited to be on the other side of this and to finally have my health back.’”

Gagliardi’s transplant was a success, and her doctors expect that her heart will last 15-25 years before she may need another transplant. She says she is thankful to have a physical reminder of the transplant to reflect on each day.

“When I look in the mirror, my chest scar represents to me my battle scar,” she said. “It shows to everyone what I’ve been through and what I’ve achieved. I remember, after the transplant, people would give me advice like ‘You can put oil on that’ or ‘You can use a scar cream and fade it away.’ I didn’t want to do that. I love my scar, and I love showing people what I’ve been through. It’s a huge part of me.”

**A Brighter Future**

Gagliardi hopes to help others going through the transplant process.

“What I would love to do in the future is become a motivational speaker,” she said. “I’ve gone around to a couple of different events, and I’ve shared my story and testimony with others. I would love to stand as an inspiration to those going through a similar situation.”

It’s now been six years since her transplant, and Gagliardi says she celebrates that anniversary every year. Soon, she’ll be celebrating a different kind of anniversary: she got engaged in September 2017. She says it was her care at UAB Medicine that is giving her this chance at a brighter future, and she couldn’t be more grateful.

“I would say to my doctors and nurses that cared for me, thank you for all that you do,” Gagliardi said. “I’m so thankful for the love you give and show your patients. You are the reason I’m here today. Thanks to UAB Medicine’s Comprehensive Transplant Institute, I can really say that my future is exciting.”