

*Jonathon's Heart*, a teacher education curriculum to raise awareness of and sensitivity to homeless children



the story behind *Jonathon's Heart*

Once upon a time, a 12-year-old boy named Jonathon lived in a shelter with his mother and 13-year-old brother.

Right before Christmas, as the flu was leveling the shelter population, Jonathon got sick. Unlike everyone else, he didn't get better, he got worse.

Since his mom had no insurance or doctor they would go to the emergency room when Jonathon seemed dangerously sick. Each time they went they were told that he just had a bad case of the flu, rest, drink liquids....

Jonathon's mom is a trained Certified Nurses' Assistant. She was trying her best to care for her son. So did the shelter staff and other residents. Jonathon missed lots of school. His mom missed lots of work. Her son couldn't play. He just tried to get through each day. Everyone was worried as he got weaker and weaker.

Finally, when again being told by the emergency room doctor that her boy just had the flu, Jonathon's mother courageously confronted the doctor. He has more than the flu, she unflinchingly asserted. She pointed to Jonathon's heart, unnaturally visible on his scrawny chest. Horrified, the doctor immediately ordered tests and found, not surprisingly, that this young boy had an enlarged heart.

Jonathon was immediately hospitalized, and almost immediately he suffered 2 heart attacks. He was transferred to a major children's hospital where he was put on the top of the list for a heart transplant. His mom stayed with him and friends took care of his older brother.

A potentially compatible heart was located in Missouri and plans were made to transport it, but tornados interfered, grounding the heart crew, forcing Jonathon and his mom to wait the longest wait of their lives.

Waiting for someone to die so your loved one could live defies description. The love and prayers from Jonathon's support network surrounded the family. Right before Easter, a 12-year-old boy died in Texas. His heart was donated and plans were made for Jonathon to receive it. On Easter Sunday, Jonathon was wheeled into the operating room and surgeons connected Jonathon with the shattered dreams of his donor, shaping Jonathon's future with this unexpected opportunity.

The transplant was the first of many difficult stages Jonathon faced. After the doctors were sure the heart would not be rejected, Jonathon needed to come into the hospital twice a week for treatments. The hospital was over 75 miles from the shelter. The hospital did not want to release Jonathon to the shelter (to avoid the illicit practice of hospitals "dumping" homeless patients on shelters). The shelter director was willing to take the family back, assuring the hospital that they would sanitize the room where the family would stay and accommodate their needs. No way said the hospital.

In the midst of all these challenges, his mother lost her job because her Family Medical Leave protection expired. She remained by her ailing son's side.

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Jonathon and his mother tried staying nearby at a relative's house. But that didn't work out and once again Jonathon and his mother faced homelessness. The shelter, struggling with financial needs to keep operating, raised over \$5,000 to help Jonathon's family. A local landlord offered an apartment, free, for a year. But it wouldn't be ready for a month. The shelter director advocated for the family to stay at the hospital's family unit until the apartment was ready. The hospital made arrangements to keep the family temporarily. Crisis averted.

Months after the transplant Jonathon is doing much better. He and his family are back together in their new apartment. Jonathon's condition is still guarded and his mother is his full-time caregiver until the doctor releases him from the need for 24-hour supervision. Jonathon will be happy to get back to a "normal" life and his mother will be happy to go back to work as a Certified Nurses' Assistant. But they are overjoyed to be together as a family under their own roof, and they're more than grateful for the love and support of their friends, medical staff and for the gift of life from Jonathon's heart donor.



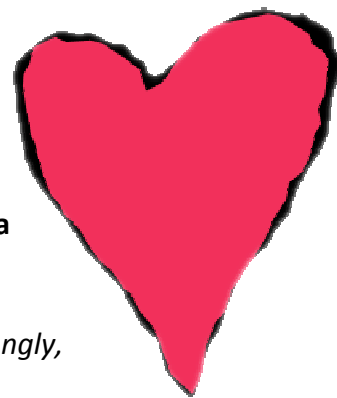
Homeless families, just like housed families, face everyday crises. They just have to do it without the comfort of home or other resources available to more stable households. Looking at the series of challenges facing Jonathon, his mom and his brother, and their non-traditional family, this young boy's extraordinary saga is inspiring.

Would insurance have made a difference? Should a mother who must stay by her child's side in a medical crisis lose her job? Do beleaguered doctors sometimes make mistakes? Are hospitals aware of logistical challenges facing families and the homeless shelters trying to help them? Should families in this country live in such dire straits that their very existence is imperiled? These and other questions deserve consideration by policymakers and ordinary citizens.

Filled with the love of his mother, brother and friends, Jonathon, with his new, healthy heart, faces life with the knowledge that he was once homeless and heart-challenged. He will, undoubtedly, make good use of every heartbeat.

Homeless kids endure many grueling ordeals—instability, insecurity, uncertainty—everyday. School is the one stable, secure, certain element in their fractured lives. **An understanding teacher is like a heart transplant, giving life to dreams and possibilities.**

***Jonathon's Heart***, the name of this teacher education curriculum, beats strongly, knowing that compassion paves the way for hope and opportunity. ♥



Jonathon's Heart was written by Diane Nilan, HEAR US Inc., [www.hearus.us](http://www.hearus.us), with permission of Jonathon's mother and in collaboration with Hope Haven Shelter in DeKalb, IL. ©HEAR US, 2008

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