

National Donate Life Month, held in April, honors residents who have been touched by organ and tissue donations – people like 14-year-old Ardazan Dennis Jr. of Holyoke, Mass., who underwent a heart transplant operation in 2008 at the age of 10. “I feel fine today,” says Ardazan. “I never got to play soccer, basketball and any sport before. Now I can.”

Ardazan’s mom, Jessica Dennis, says the need for organ transplants is critical. “There’s such a need out there for kids, adults, babies. They’re just waiting for an extra life and they need this chance to live and show the world what they’re here for.”

The Dennis family knows all too well how hard the wait for a critically needed organ can be. In 2008, the family’s hometown paper, *The Reminder*, ran this story:

Ten-year-old Ardazan Dennis Jr. of Holyoke is like many rambunctious young boys he wants to run around outside and play sports. But unlike others his age, Ardazan Jr. has lived his entire life with a failing heart.

Multiple surgeries, which began when he was an infant, have only bought him time and have failed to correct his condition, called hypoplastic right heart syndrome (HRHS). According to the Heart Institute for Children, HRHS is the underdevelopment of the right-sided structures of the heart, therefore causing inadequate blood flow to the lungs.

Ardazan Jr. has been at Children’s Hospital Boston since August and will remain there until he receives a new heart. He is kept company by his mother Jessica, who chose to quit her job as a family liaison for Holyoke Public Schools in order to be with her son full-time. Jessica’s husband, Ardazan Sr., remains at home with their two other children, 13-year-old Tyree and seven-year-old Serena, completing dual roles as Mr. Mom and breadwinner as a member of Westfield State College’s (WSC) Facilities and Operations staff.

Ardazan Sr. explained that times have been tough for his family as he struggles to maintain their finances and fund his weekend trips to Boston with Tyree and Serena.

Kathy Larimore, chief steward for Unit 2 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees at WSC, said upon learning her colleague’s financial hardship, she began fundraising initiatives across the campus and the community. Holyoke High School also joined the fundraising efforts and hosted a large spaghetti supper fundraiser. “This poor family has suffered so much,” Larimore said. “[This situation has created] a real financial hardship. He needed money to keep going back and forth to see his son. I wanted to do something for him.”

Ardazan Sr. said he is overwhelmed by the generosity of the Holyoke and WSC communities. “I like to do things on my own but the situation is very hard and I just can’t do it by myself,” he said. “With the gas prices and the [cost of a] full tank of gas in my crusty old van and then expenses while I’m down there [in Boston, it adds up]. My family here at Scanlon Hall have been here with me every step of the way and make sure that I keep my head above water.”

Ardazan Sr. explained that in spite of the circumstances, his son will never give up his fight to live a full life. “His spirits are up and down,” Ardazan Sr. explained. “He’s a little dude and he wants to be outside ripping and running. With the new heart he can run around. He’s not a quitter. He’s very smart and he understands what’s going on.

“I just want the best for my kids,” he continued. “I pray every day and do my Hail Marys. I hope he comes home soon. I miss my son.”