

Tragic path for heart transplant teen given a second chance at life

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By Alexis Stevens and Steve Visser - The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Without a heart transplant, Anthony Tremayne Stokes would live only a few months. With his new heart, Stokes lived fewer than 20.

After being given another chance of life, Stokes, 17, died Tuesday when he crashed a stolen car after a crime spree, Roswell police said. In his young life, Stokes had already been in criminal trouble numerous times. Before he was old enough to drive, he was required to wear an ankle monitor. Stokes' death reopened the debate of whether he should have ever been given the vital organ.

His "non-compliance" — doctors said they were concerned Stokes would not follow the requisite treatment plans after surgery — had caused Children's Healthcare of Atlanta to bump Stokes, then 15, off the waiting list for a heart transplant. His crying mother's pleas quickly escalated to the national stage.

His mother said hospital authorities had unfairly stereotyped her son as a bad kid; which she said was a reason they had refused the life-saving operation. She said he had only had a fight at school.

"They just don't want to give him a chance," Stokes' mother, Melencia Hamilton, said at the time.

Days later after a sympathetic media blitz, Stokes was put on the list for a transplant, and on Aug. 23, 2013, he underwent a five-hour surgery to get his new heart.

It was supposed to be a chance for Stokes to start over, and in addition to his medical care, he seemed to have a support team to help set him on the right path toward adulthood. Stokes' mother had contacted a mentor and author, Mack Major, asking for help for her son.

"When I first met Anthony I knew he was a confused young man," Major told Channel 2 Action News on Wednesday. "I saw that I could get to him because I watched how he responded to everything that I said."

A former girlfriend said she saw a changed Stokes after the surgery, a young man who aspired to be better. Jonae Tate, 18, told The Atlanta Journal-Constitution Wednesday she and Stokes stayed friends after breaking up, but she didn't know Stokes had been in trouble again, as recently as a January arrest in DeKalb County. "If I had known he was like this, I would've sat him down and talked to him," Tate said Wednesday.

Stokes allegedly carjacked a Honda driver in Dunwoody and then tried to burglarize a home in Roswell, Officer Lisa Holland said. After the burglary, officers spotted the stolen Honda and pursued it, Holland said. During the chase, Stokes clipped a car in an intersection, jumped the curb and hit a pedestrian before colliding with a SunTrust Bank sign, Holland said.

"He lost control and there was a long set of skid marks," she said.

The driver of the other car was uninjured and the pedestrian's injuries required hospitalization but weren't life-threatening, according to police.

It was not the outcome anyone wanted for Stokes. The teen once thought unable to comply with medical treatment was ultimately unable to comply with the law.

DeKalb Police arrested Stokes 11 times between 2010 and 2015, said Capt. Steve Fore. The charges included burglary, auto theft, weapons charges, terroristic threats. He had a burglary and truancy charge in 2010 as well as another burglary charge of a home in December 2012 and he picked up another burglary charge in February 2013, six months before the transplant controversy erupted, Fore said.

In April of that year police stopped a Tahoe with Stokes and two other teens because someone complained the group had fired a gun several times after a disagreement. The arresting officer found two stolen pistols and also arrested Stokes for an outstanding arson warrant, the report said.

A year later he was arrested at Dillard's in Stonecrest Mall for shoplifting. Police found a 9mm pistol concealed in his jacket, which turned out to be stolen, according to a police report.

Last November he was arrested in a car that had been reported stolen and police found pistols under the front seats, which the car owner said did not belong to her.

"While at the scene, the victim asked to see and possibly speak to the suspect Anthony Stokes," Officer F.M. Eposito wrote in his report. "While (she was) talking calmly to him, he was completely irate and threatened to come and get her after he gets out of jail. Both Officer Porter and I were standing there when he said this. Then he also made noise like gun fire *brrrapppp*."

At the time of the arrest Stokes was wearing an a court-ordered ankle bracelet — similar to the one he had been wearing in 2013 during the transplant — for possessing a stolen car.

Based on Stokes' recent Facebook posts and numerous selfies, the teenager was headed down a path that was destined to end in tragedy. Photo after photo posted by Stokes shows a thin, young man that looks younger than his years, except for a small goatee and tattoos. In many pictures, Stokes has photographed himself pointing a handgun, holding cash and smoking.

Stokes' mother, Hamilton, could not be located Wednesday, despite numerous phone calls and checks of addresses. The current resident of Hamilton's former home said officers had three times attempted to find Stokes to serve him with an arrest warrant.

After Stokes' surgery, his mother told the mentor, Major, that she no longer needed his help. Major said he was disappointed, but still wanted the best for Stokes. Despite the teen's criminal history, Major said he was grateful for having the chance to influence Stokes.

"They say a heart was wasted," Major said. "I have never seen a wasted heart. The heart was beating in the chest of a human being and heated until it stopped."

— Staff writer Craig Schneider contributed to this report.