Georgia heart patients donating used pacemakers to save pets' lives

By: Craig Lucie

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ATHENS, Ga. - Georgia heart patients are donating their used pacemakers to pets.

Channel 2 Anchor Craig Lucie met an 11-year-old husky who is alive today because of one of those used devices.

The first of those used pacemakers was donated to the University of Georgia's vet school by a cardiac nurse years after she lost her own dog to heart failure.

"I'm such a dog enthusiast," Terri Matula explained.

Before becoming a cardiac nurse, Matula had a broken heart she couldn't mend: that of her cocker spaniel Gator.

Gator needed an expensive pacemaker to save his life, but Matula and her husband were in college and money was tight. They couldn't afford it.

"Eventually Gator died from complications due to congestive heart failure," Matula said. Years later another heart needed mending, Matula's husband's. He did get a pacemaker but as his condition changed he needed a new device. Used pacemakers are typically thrown away.

"I told the cardiologist I wanted to keep his old device because I thought about Gator," Matula said.

She called the University of Georgia's Veterinary Teaching Hospital with a unique donation: could her husband's used pacemaker help a pet in need?

"Animals actually use the same pacemakers that are in people," said UGA veterinary cardiologist Dr. Gregg Rapoport.

Not only did UGA take Matula's pacemaker, they've partnered with Matula 's hospital, Navicent Health, to take any pacemaker donated from cardiac patients. Rapoport said those donations offset the cost of a procedure that can costs thousands.

"She saw the potential value for animals in developing a relationship with a veterinary institution and it's been incredibly rewarding working with her and developing that relationship," Rapoport said.

Since the program started in 2018, people have donated more than 40 pacemakers. Doctors are not only putting them in dogs, they've also implanted them in cats, a horse and even a ferret.

One of those dogs was Matty Goldstein's 11-year-old husky, Agent Cooper.

"Agent Cooper had a third-degree heart block," Goldstein said. "They said the heart was going to stop beating within days or months and we would lose him."

Vets at UGA discovered Agent Cooper's heart block while treating him for thyroid cancer. Goldstein said he didn't ask a lot of questions when vets said a used pacemaker would save his dog's life.

"I thought I was going to lose my dog, and to my wife and I, they are our children," Goldstein said. "They told me they could do it. I said OK."

Matula said the partnership between Navicent Health and UGA is a fitting tribute to Gator. Not one Navicent heart patient has said no to donating their used pacemakers.

"It makes them feel like the situation they're going through, which is not necessarily so pleasant, there's a silver lining," she said.

Find more information on how to donate a pacemaker here.