

GINGER IRELAND LIVING DONOR EXPERIENCE COMES FULL CIRCLE

by Luke Harbur, Liver Recipient

Ginger Ireland's childhood, education, job and family revolve around Kansas City, Mo. For Ginger, Kansas City has always been home. Like all of us, Ginger lives with a story. Her story involves her father David, doctors with doubt, family members with hope and a surgery still considered a medical miracle.

Ginger Ireland is a living liver donor to her father and their transplant journey began in 2002.

Ginger has always known her dad as a "busy beaver." Growing up he ingrained that mindset into Ginger and her brothers. One day Ginger's mom, Pam, called because David stayed home from work. At that point, Ginger knew something was wrong.



Ginger Ireland and her father, David

Pam told Ginger her dad had intense stomach pain and bleeding. Immediately, Ginger drove her dad to the emergency room. As the doctor reviewed her dad's medical charts and symptoms, the doctor said he didn't know what was going on. He suspected that Ginger's dad showed signs of liver failure.

At the time of the doctor's diagnoses, Ginger was in her 30s. Since David worked in an auto repair shop around paint fumes and toxic chemicals, and she rarely saw him drink, the cause of the liver failure was unclear. Even after checking with other family members, the doctor remained unconvinced and suggested that the family simply monitor his health.

Two months later, Ginger's father became ill at his son's birthday party. Again Ginger took her father to the hospital. The doctor said he would have to have a liver transplant, but because of the suspicions regarding possible (unproven) alcohol use, he said Ginger's dad would never make it to transplantation.

Ginger had always known her dad as a “busy beaver.”

That’s when Ginger remembered a video she watched while going to college for her License in Practical Nursing (LPN) in 1998. In one of her health classes, Ginger watched a video about someone donating a liver while they were still alive.

It was then Ginger decided to embark on a journey to the University of Nebraska. At the time, they were one of the only institutions performing living liver transplants. During her snowy, three-day stay in Omaha, Ginger swears she was told 147 times she may die from this operation. But this did not phase Ginger, for she believed saving another person’s life, especially her dad’s, by being a living donor was the right decision.

After a medical evaluation with the university’s transplant team, they found Ginger to be the perfect match for her dad. Now Ginger had to tell her family about the risks and choice of a living donor.

First, Ginger spoke with her mom Pam. Ginger’s mom, who also has a License in Practical Nursing, accepted Ginger’s proposal. Then Ginger spoke with her two children, Brittney and Nicholas. At the time Brittney was 13 and Nicholas was 7. They both agreed her decision was the right thing to do.

Then Ginger spoke with her dad. At first, he refused to even consider the idea since he didn’t want to think of losing his child. But Ginger explained the support from other family members and the low chance of him getting donated through the national transplant waiting list. Then he too accepted her proposal.

Ginger and her father drove to the University of Nebraska in February 2003 for the transplant. On February 27 both had received final medical evaluations and were ready for the procedure. Due to a possible heart risk for Ginger, the surgery was cancelled. But after positive results from a treadmill test, the surgery commenced the next day.

Today, 12 years after surgery, Ginger and David still prosper thanks to the gift of life. David has a 3-year-old grandson and likes to travel. Although he no longer works on cars, he drives a school bus to keep himself busy in retirement.

As for Ginger, she received her Bachelor’s degree from Kansas University in 2011 and hopes to receive her Master’s degree in 2016. She currently works at the University of Kansas Hospital in the medical/surgical section of the intensive care unit. She is trying diligently to get a job in transplantation because she wants to create the impact that affected her life over a decade ago.

Working in the intensive care unit, Ginger remembers meeting a man who was close to giving up waiting for a liver transplant. Ginger knelt down to his bedside and told him her story. Shortly, the man’s tearful wife walked up to Ginger saying her husband’s life was saved because of this hope.

It is moments like these that Ginger believes stories bring her living donor experience full circle. This is why she believes she would do it all over again; this is why Ginger believes she would never change a thing.

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