

Eternally Grateful

by Tim Jennings

The look on my doctor's face said it all. He simply stood there, with no offer of words, but seemed to be trying to find the right ones. This surprised me as I believed he had done this in the past, and I'd already dealt with the inevitable.

So I asked the question, "How long do I have?"

His reply was terse and unfeeling. "About three months," and he meant it.

He turned and walked out of the hospital room. I had never been so alone. Hepatitis C had been ravaging my body for years and had nearly completed its reprehensible work. My liver and kidneys had finally and completely failed.

I called my wife and my pastors, who assembled there to hear what I'd just been told. After a few moments of tears, my wife wiped her face and said, "We're not giving up. We will continue to believe for our miracle." And that was that. The date was February 2, 2008.

I was already on the waiting list for a liver, and now that my kidneys had failed, the urgency for transplant had just been multiplied exponentially. I was dying!

We went to one well-known hospital where I went on 24-hour dialysis in the intensive care unit and was evaluated for transplant. Their assessment was that I was too sick and would not survive the surgeries. I was sent home to die.

My wife ... my hero ... would not accept that as the final answer. She arranged for a bed in Barnes Jewish Hospital in St. Louis, and we started the evaluation process all over again. I was too weak and sick to leave the hospital, so I remained there while she continued to work and maintain the household, while being with me as much as she possibly could. On one return trip to St.

Louis from Jefferson City, our vehicle was totaled when an oncoming car hydroplaned and slammed into her, adding a great deal of stress to an unbelievably difficult time. She stood strong.

On May 1, 2008, within hours of death and having endured countless complications, the word came. Miracles do happen! A compatible donor liver and kidney had been located. Someone had died, and his family was offering me this unbelievable gift. The gift of life! Someone who was a son, grandson, husband, father and brother had tragically lost his life, and now his loved ones were offering me new life. Can you imagine that? How can that be? The question still rings in my head and in my heart. But it happens every day. Families the world over are faced with the same questions. Some have planned ahead and lessened the complications of donating life. Others, in the hour of their sorrow make the heroic decision to reach out to a stranger to give or improve life. Again, and still to this day, I ask "How can that be?"

The words of thank you to my donor family came hard. Think about it. How do you say thank you to someone who lost their own loved one, then gave my life back to me? I did manage to tell them, but more importantly, I honor their unimaginable sacrifice as I do my best every day to make our world a better place. I am back to work as a Youth Specialist with the Division of Youth Services, and every day I thank my donor family. When I hold my grandson, I thank them. When I encourage a friend, I thank them. When I help a stranger, I thank them. When I tell others about this miracle and my God, I thank them. And on it goes. I am bound by my pledge to them to "pay it forward."

And I believe I honor them when I sign my donor card and make the proper arrangements with my family, as well as when I encourage other people I meet to do the same. As a button I wear says, "Don't take your organs to heaven... Heaven knows we need them here."

