

My Second Life: Learning to live with dialysis

Contributed by Brett Behrens
Saturday, 11 October 2008

Where to start …

My parents told me at an early age that you only live once and time goes by too fast, so make the most of it. I guess that would mean anomaly ... this is my second life. I'm lucky. I screwed up the first one so I'm trying to make up for it the second time around.

You could say I had it all.

I had a wonderful wife (I thought so at the time), I was a successful photojournalist who left the crazy world of the newspaper game to pursue a career operating my own portrait photography business.

That's where the wheels fell off the truck.

Within a five-year period I found out I was diabetic.

At the time of my diabetic diagnosis, I became divorced from that wonderful wife, she took my business and everything in it and sold it for cash, my mom passed away from cancer and for a short time, I found myself homeless. You could say the 1990s weren't a very good decade for me.

When I was diagnosed with diabetes, my doctor said the disease usually takes one of two roads. It is there and it is more of a gnat that drives you crazy. It can also be a raging wildfire that is difficult to contain. Guess which road it took.

For seven years I did all I could to try and beat the unbeatable. Gone were regular drinks with sugar, Oreo cookies, maple syrup and almost anything else that I really enjoyed. I love food. That was probably the reason I became diabetic. Thank God they didn't take my green beans from me. Then we would have a real problem.

In 1998 after having a severe case of cellulitis in my right leg that kept me in the hospital for two weeks, the doctors noticed my kidney function had dropped dramatically. They said it was from the medicine they had given me to get rid of cellulitis.

We went to see a neurologist with the idea of his being able to work some magic and increase the function of my kidneys.

After waiting for what seemed to be an eternity, the doctor came in and calmly announced that my kidney function was so low that he felt I would need to start dialysis within the next six months.

My wife's (I had just remarried) and my jaws hit the floor. In fact it was one of the only times I ever saw her cry. Of course that made me cry.

After mulling over the situation and seeing my doctor, he referred me to a nephrologist's office in Santa Rosa and my second life was born.

I hope to enlighten you with a world which is very misunderstood, the world of dialysis.

It's a tough way to live. Just ask the millions on it and the more than 3,000 just in the Bay Area who are waiting and hoping for a kidney transplant.

I welcome your questions, your comments and your experiences with someone you've known who happened to be a dialysis patient.

I hope you enjoy my thoughts. They may be tough to swallow and may seem to be graphic at times. But they will be an honest look at an area more and more of the American population may be faced with unless their way of life takes a dramatic change.

Brett Behrens will be writing a regular column for Lake County News. Behrens, 46, is a native of Lake County. He has spent most of his life behind the lens as a photojournalist and the owner of a successful portrait photography studio. He continues his image-making activities as his time and eyesight allows.

{mos_sb_discuss:4}