

My Second Life: Confronting health problems

Contributed by Brett Behrens
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Never having done something like this before, I am not sure where to start.

So I'll take you back to the beginning of this new beginning of my life written in several entries summarizing the past nine years, including the highs and the lows. Hopefully at that point, I'll be to my life as it is today.

I'm afraid that if I start from today things that took place in 1999 won't make much sense. They still might not.

Knowing that dialysis was a reality, I sat down with my dialysis nurse to discuss the possibilities. There were many.

There was, of course, hemo dialysis. This is where you are hooked up to a machine for a period of time determined by your nephrologist, for a machine to filter your blood for waste and excess fluid. Think of it as a large machine doing the work your kidneys would normally. For me that would be about four hours a session, three times a week.

Second, there was peritoneal dialysis. Now this is a little more complicated to explain.

A surgeon places a peritoneal dialysis catheter in your abdomen. Dialysis occurs when you fill your abdomen with dialysis chemistry. Next the blood passes through the liquids as they travel from one area to another and re-entering your blood vessels. You drain and fill your abdomen four times a day. Each "exchange" takes about 45 minutes. Peritoneal dialysis is much more mobile as you can take the bags of chemistry with you if you are going on a trip.

With hemo, you have to make arrangements with a center close to the area you're visiting and hope they have room to fit you in. And with more people needing dialysis, being a traveling patient is becoming increasingly more difficult.

Of course there was a third choice, do nothing and die.

This really isn't what I wanted. I didn't relish the thought of going to a clinic three times a week. To me, it was just another part of losing my independence. By this time the vision in my left eye was getting worse and I knew my time driving was the next thing that was going to be taken from me.

This was not a good time in my life.

At least I can say that in my 25 years of driving I never had an accident. I had several close calls but never a wreck.

Time went forward and I did lose my driving privileges as well as more sight in the eye I had left. I would have my good days but I knew my vision would never be good enough to get my license back.

Never in my life did I ever think I would follow in my father's footsteps. But little did I know, that was just what I was doing.

In attempting to get on the kidney transplant waiting list, I was required to get an angiogram done. For those who don't know, an angiogram is where they run a camera up through your thigh to your heart to see what kind of condition your heart is in.

In my case, the results weren't good. They found major blockages and said I was in dire need of bypass surgery.

So now a kidney transplant was on hold and I needed some major heart work. The toughest part was going to be finding a surgeon willing to take a chance with a diabetic on dialysis with an injection fraction of about 15 percent. The injection fraction is the percentage of blood pumped out of the heart on the down beat.

But my cardiologist, Dr. James Srebro knew the man for the job, Dr. Ramsey Deeks. Both are doctors in Napa and as far as I'm concerned the best in their fields.

Dr. Deeks said I needed at least two, possibly four bypasses, but he assured me he would not do anything that my body couldn't take. With that we said it's what we need to do and let's get a time scheduled.

He harvested a pair of smaller veins near my heart and about five hours later, I was good as new. I spent a day and a half in ICU and another two and a half hours in a regular room and that was it. I was prepared for five to six days there. The worst of my pain was the day after surgery when they got me out of bed for a walk. I made one lap around the wing and I was pooped.

Actually, the worst pain was once when I sneezed. I thought my chest was going to explode. But I had my heart shaped pillow they gave me to support my chest and all was intact.

In fact the day I was discharged, we went home and I attended a Boy Scout meeting. My wife, Peggy, called me crazy. It was a challenge I gave myself to complete.

It's those challenges which make me stronger and keep up the spirit to make this second life one that I will make better than the first.

I realize I am tough on myself and I drive myself harder now than I ever have. But as I explain to Peggy, I'm no tougher on others than I am on myself. She tells me I need to settle down and enjoy life. She says I go to extremes at times. Maybe she's right. But when you're 46 sometimes it's hard to change what you've always known and done.

My father had triple bypass surgery and came back stronger and he said he felt 25 years younger. Me too.

That was five years ago, the day when President Bush landed on the aircraft carrier and announced the war in Iraq was over.

Since then, I have had many more procedures done, tried to get back on the transplant list three times and am now working to get a part-time job working from home. Heck I even had pneumonia and wound up on a ventilator with a tube run down my throat for three days. That happened the day after Christmas last year.

There's so much I could talk about just in the last nine years of my life, I'd never catch you up to October 2008.

The only reason I tell you these things is I want you to know a bit about my life. My second life.

Brett Behrens is writing a regular column for Lake County News about dealing with serious health problems. 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.

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