

The Bolingbrook Sun

Beating the odds

After nearly dying, Bolingbrook woman gets transplant and wins sports medal

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On Sept. 15, Jen Klouse will celebrate 10 years of using a donated liver to stay alive.

She is not only alive and joyful about it, but she also won a bronze medal for basketball last month in the 2008 Transplant Games in Pittsburgh.

"I am so grateful to be alive. Every day it crosses my mind as to what my purpose of being alive is. I'm sure someday it will reveal itself," she said.



Bolingbrook resident Jen Klouse took home a medal in basketball from the recent Transplant Games. Sharing the moment with Klouse, right, are teammate Rosemary Rodriguez, left, and Gina Baxter, coach of the basketball team.
Courtesy of Jen Klouse

Being an inspiration to others may be part of that purpose. This year was the first time she competed as part of the 160-member "Team Illinois" at the Transplant Games. She helped both the co-ed basketball and volleyball teams win bronze medals at the national competition.

Klouse, 30, who has lived in Bolingbrook for three years, was a high school senior, looking forward to homecoming at her school in Michigan, when she began to feel sick.

"It was a normal school day. This particular day seemed much longer than the rest because I wasn't feeling the greatest," she recalled.

A checkup was scheduled with her doctor, because she was feeling tired all the time and vomiting frequently. Tests revealed that her body was accumulating too much copper.

Her brother Erik recently learned he had Wilson's disease, and her parents feared the same for their daughter.

At first she wasn't worried about the symptoms.

"I didn't worry too much and thought it would pass in a few days," she said.

Klouse is an independent go-getter and an athlete, so she didn't like to slow down. There was a cousin's wedding to attend, sports to participate in and of course homecoming was just around the corner.

"During the night, I got really sick, but I just figured it was the flu, because I had the basic symptoms of fever, aches and vomiting. I didn't worry too much and thought it would pass in a few days," she said.

But jaundice set in and Wilson's disease was confirmed. Surgery was necessary and a transplant was vital, she said.

"My mom sort of rushed them (the doctors) along by telling them to contact Dr. Brewer, she specializes in the area of Wilson's disease down at the University of Michigan Hospital in Ann Arbor. The doctors in Saginaw did not know what was wrong with me," she said.

When the new set of doctors came in and told her parents she needed a liver transplant, it was the scariest night of her life, she said.

A frantic ambulance ride got her to the University of Michigan hospital where within 24 hours a liver became available. But Klouse was slipping in and out of consciousness.

Erik took time out from college to be with her. Every night he read from the Bible to comfort her as he sat by her bedside.

"If I was going to lose him for some reason, I really don't know what I would do because he is probably one of the closest people to me," she said. "The night before I went into surgery, Erik was by my bedside and read a verse to me."

Those words, so important to her and her family, were the last she heard before being wheeled into surgery.

"My kidneys were shutting down. I was losing control of some of the functions of my body. I honestly don't remember a lot after this," she said.

By the time she entered the operating room she was in a coma.

When the seven-hour transplant was over and she was out of the coma, she remembers her family and friends coming to see her.

"I remember my JV basketball coach smiling down at me," she said. "I really couldn't say much because I was not all there. I also had a breathing and feeding tube in the back of my throat, which also made it difficult to talk clearly."

She cried when her school friends visited, wanting to be out with them and remembering her school and homecoming.

It was very encouraging, though, when her doctors said she could eat regular food.

"In my head was a party. I could eat as much pizza, ice cream or anything else I wanted," she said.

As she slowly recovered, getting stronger every day, Erik was sure that his sister could have one day out of the hospital. He persuaded her doctors to let her attend her homecoming dance.

She did, and Klouse was named homecoming queen to the cheers of her many school friends.

She graduated the next summer, with the tutoring help of her brother, and went on to earn a bachelor's degree in psychology. Klouse is employed at Trinity Services in New Lenox, where she works to find homes for disabled people.

Now, instead of 40 different pills a day, she is down to only one, an anti-rejection drug called cyclosporine. However, that one pill she will have to take for the rest of her life.

"Transplants can be rejected at any time," she said.

Now that her life is pretty much back to normal, although she has only 10 percent of her immune system, she is considering writing to the family of the man whose liver is keeping her alive.

She has so much gratitude in her heart, is it hard to express it, she said. She can write through the Donate Life Illinois organization, which keeps the identity of donors private.

Klouse was only told that her donor was a 40-year-old man from western Michigan who died in September 1998 of a head injury.

But she suspects he must have liked coffee a lot.

Since she's had the liver installed she really likes coffee. Before her transplant she didn't like coffee at all, she said.

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