



'It's like you owe them'

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POPLAR GROVE -

Mike Timmerman wants to say "thank you." He just doesn't know whom to thank.

Seven months ago, the 39-year-old was a diabetic in miserable pain. His kidneys were functioning at 13 percent. Life-saving dialysis treatments forced him to sit for hours at a time, three days a week with a pencil-sized needle in his arm. Sitting was the worst part of those treatments — Mike hates sitting still.

His organ transplants changed all that. Today, the diabetes and all those needles are gone.

Doctors tell him his new kidney and pancreas have added another 20 years to his life.

Though privacy laws veil the identities of organ donors, Mike can't shake the feeling that someone deserves a thank you, a thought that is especially on his mind at this time of year.

His health is a gift from a stranger who died. He often thinks of that family, who loved that person and grieved his or her death.

"It's in the back of my head. I have to meet these people or find out something about them. You know, it's like you owe them — a 'thank you' or a hug or something," he said.

History of diabetes

Since 1982, Mike has lived with Type 1 diabetes, which occurs when the body produces the wrong levels of insulin, the hormone that converts sugar into energy. Type 1 was formerly known as juvenile-onset diabetes and is the most serious form of the disease. Type 1 diabetics rely on insulin supplements to stabilize their blood sugar levels.

Seven years ago, doctors told Mike his kidneys were failing and recommended dialysis. Mike resisted. He didn't want to sit for hours as dialysis machines manually filtered his blood — a job his kidneys could no longer do. His first dialysis treatment was February last year.

But dialysis was only a temporary fix. He needed a new kidney. He was also a good candidate for a new pancreas, the organ that produces insulin and could possibly end his diabetes.

Mike joined the national organ transplant waiting list Nov. 3, 2005.

There are 98,000 others waiting for transplants right now. Last year, more than 7,000 people died waiting.

The call came at 10 a.m. April 8. A possible donor had been found.

Mike and his family tried not to get excited. Two false alarms had already taught them not to get their hopes up. The last time, Mike was being prepped for surgery when they learned the donor wouldn't work after all.

This time, Mike was told to sit tight until his doctors were sure the donor would work.

Rush to the hospital

When they heard the news, they had two hours to get to the hospital. His father, Ron Timmerman, played chauffeur. He hates the drive to Chicago.

"I don't go to Chicago," he said. "You're not used to driving there, so you're not used to all that traffic. Gee whiz, am I supposed to be in this right lane now because I've got a turn up here?"

The family had just 10 minutes to spare by the time they made it to the Kovler Organ Transplantation Center at Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago.

Mike was hustled into surgery. Ron and Mike's mother, Dixie Timmerman, sat up all night. Ron tried to doze in the waiting room chairs. Dixie couldn't sleep.

At midnight, the Timmermans learned the first surgery worked. Mike had a new kidney. By 3 a.m., the Timmermans were told Mike's new pancreas was functioning.

"It was like being reborn. That's what the kidney doctor said," Dixie said.

More than 2,300 people are waiting for a kidney and pancreas transplant this year — last year, fewer than 1,000 received them.

Today, Mike is diabetes free. His new pancreas is producing enough insulin to balance his sugar levels and replace his dialysis and daily injections.

He enjoys spending time outdoors, mowing grass and chopping wood as part of the landscaping business he runs from the home he shares with his parents.

Of course, Mike has to be careful. His immune system will be sensitive, so he'll have to skip visits with his nieces and nephew when they have the sniffles or the flu. And for the rest of his life, he'll continue taking the anti-rejection drugs prescribed since his organ transplants.

Contact with donor's family

Mike believes his health is a gift. But there are no guarantees he'll be able say so.

Privacy laws protect the identity of organ donors and their families. To find each other, Mike and the donor's family must write to the transplant center at the hospital. Before forwarding the notes, all identifying information is removed, said Joel Newman, assistant director of communications for the United Network for Organ Sharing.

Most donors' families and transplant recipients communicate through letter, Newman said.

Beside, Mike's parents aren't so sure that Mike's pursuing a meeting is a good idea.

"It could bring back a lot of bad memories ... Nobody knows," Ron said. "But to have the forethought to be an organ donor, somebody got a benefit out of it, out of the loss. But still, maybe they don't want to know."

Mike's going to try anyway.

"I don't know what I'd say. Probably be speechless," Mike said. "I have no idea what they look like. Maybe I've stood next to them and didn't even know it."

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