

SOUTHTOWNSTAR

Transplanting info

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By Carole Sharwarko, Staff writer

Suddenly, Audrey Wilson went blind.

She hadn't been feeling well for a few days before going on a short getaway with friends. A day into the trip, her extreme lethargy and nausea caught up with her.

After friends rushed her to the hospital, a biopsy revealed the 32-year-old woman had third-stage kidney disease. One kidney nearly was gone, causing her temporary blindness, nausea and even confusion.

Now 10 years later, Wilson enjoys a new kidney and appreciates it every day, she said. So the Chicago police officer and Beverly resident spreads the message about kidney disease screening, hoping to help others avoid a similar ordeal.

As a local speaker for the National Kidney Foundation, Wilson brought the organization's KidneyMobile to Chicago's Morgan Park police district May 2.

"I was really pushing for this event for quite some time," said Wilson, who works in traffic court at the Daley Center in Chicago. "Because of the type of lifestyle police officers have, the majority of us have a lot of stress. And stress can lead to hypertension."

Police officers also neglect their sleeping and dietary needs, Wilson said. Having finished the police academy only a year before her diagnosis, she was in the best shape of her life. Despite a hectic midnight schedule and tending to her infant daughter, Wilson's life rolled along just fine.

But she said she thinks the big life changes incited her symptoms. The day friends brought her to the hospital, Wilson's blood pressure was 230 over 180.

"Diabetes and high blood pressure are the two main causes of chronic kidney disease," said Nancy LePain, a nurse practitioner for the National Kidney Foundation. "It's an insidious disease. By the time you feel ill, the disease has progressed. The sad part is that with screening and adequate treatment, we can treat or even prevent it."

Wilson said her case shows someone who seems healthy actually can suffer from the serious malady.

So she brought the KidneyMobile to the Southland in hopes her fellow officers and community members would take advantage of the free screenings. LePain said about 59 officers were tested. Unfortunately, poor weather kept the community turnout low. But LePain encouraged people to seek out screening. Not every community has someone like Wilson.

"She's very passionate about kidney disease and prevention, and reaching as many people as possible," LePain said.

Wilson said she denied her condition when doctors first diagnosed it. She rejected their suggestions to put her on Prednisone, a steroid that causes body swelling. Instead, she cut salt completely from her diet in an effort to control her blood pressure and the progression of her disease.

At night, she performed her own dialysis, inserted through a shunt in her abdomen. The machine ran for about 10 hours while she slept. Then Wilson woke up at 4:30 a.m., worked a 6 a.m. to 2 p.m. shift and returned home to her husband, Michael, and daughter, Ashley Gross.

"It was the longest six months of my life," she said. "But I'm glad I chose to do it. It made me stronger."

That strength carried her until she received a new kidney, walking out of the hospital March 6, 2005, her 43rd birthday.

Now she talks to groups of adults and high school students. She warns them about the silent dangers of kidney disease and encourages them to become organ donors. Because of her live donor, Wilson continues to tell her tale, now with more energy than she's ever had, she said.

"I don't get tired of telling my story because it keeps me grounded and humble," Wilson said. "It makes me not forget where I was, and where I've come to."

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