Dana Gilliam (right) received a life-saving kidney transplant from his son Brian (left). Together, they celebrated Dana’s being honored as Laker for a Day in February 2018.

Photos: Courtesy of the Los Angeles Lakers
ON AUGUST 9, 2017, AT 70 YEARS OF AGE, I RECEIVED A SECOND CHANCE AT LIFE. THAT IS WHEN I UNDERWENT A KIDNEY TRANSPLANT AT UCLA. MY SON BRIAN WAS THE DONOR.

Whether or not to allow him to donate was a difficult choice for our family to have to make. I learned nearly 25 years ago that I had just one functioning kidney, but it worked well enough until it began to slow down about five years ago. Now it was failing. Our other son Wade had had a benign tumor removed from one of his kidneys in 2015. My father had kidney cancer when he was in his 40s; he died at age 67, after surviving on hemodialysis for the last 3-1/2 years of his life. Brian wanted to donate, but my wife and I worried that with our family’s history of kidney disease, he might need both of his organs.

More than two years had passed since I’d begun dialysis — reluctantly, but I was in pretty bad shape so had little choice — and I wasn’t improving. It didn’t look like I had a lot of time left. I was put on the transplant list and began the process at UCLA. At my first meeting, I learned that there is a 10-year waiting list for a donor kidney from a cadaver. For someone my age, it seemed I would need to have my own living donor if I hoped to survive. Over the next 18 months, I found one person who was willing to donate a kidney. He had filled out all the paperwork, but then he died unexpectedly. I found that my brother-in-law was a match, but his doctor told him that he was too old to be a donor. I figured that there was no hope and that I would just continue on dialysis until the end. And I was starting to deteriorate. I was undergoing more than 11 hours of peritoneal dialysis every night, and it still wasn’t doing the job. My doctors added an additional manual session during the day. At this point, I was hooked up to a dialysis machine for more than half of every single day of my life.

Brian and his wife Roxanne called one evening and told me that he wanted to donate one of his kidneys. I really didn’t know what to say. Was it okay with Roxanne? How did his two boys, Jacob and Sean, feel about it? What if he needed it himself? Brian said it was fine with his family, and he reassured me that before he would be allowed to donate an organ he would be thoroughly checked out from top to bottom. How could I say no? Yes! I wanted to live!

We started the process right away at UCLA. Brian and I went through many, many tests before UCLA gave us the OK to proceed with the transplant. We met with our surgeons; Brian’s was Dr. Albin Gritsch (RES ’91) and mine was Dr. Jeffrey Veale (FEL ’06). We also met with Dr. Gabriel Danovitch, the medical director of the transplant team, before and after the surgery.

Brian is such an honorable man, and not once did he waver in his commitment. On August 9, 2017, I received his kidney. Brian recovered well and was able to return to work in just a few weeks. I am still recovering, but I feel well. My new kidney is working great! My son and I have both been so blessed by this experience. My blessing is quite obvious — I am alive and regaining my strength and health. Brian’s blessing is an internal one, but he wants to share it with the world. What better blessing can a person receive than to save another’s life? He has now become part of an organ donation program through UCLA. We both want to keep the blessings coming. We want the world to know not to be afraid to donate an organ. The outcome far outweighs the fear.

I am grateful to so many people. Everyone at UCLA who was involved in our care — before, during and after the surgery. I am also grateful for the Lord’s blessing throughout this whole experience. Most of all, I believe I would not be alive today if it were not for Brian and his unselfish love for his Dad. To paraphrase a scripture: No greater love could Brian have than to give of his kidney for me. Thank you from a deeply grateful man.

To watch a video about Dana Gilliam as Laker for a Day, click on the link to this article at: uclahealth.org/u-magazine

Dana Gilliam (at home with his grandson Jacob, top) is retired after working in the food-service industry for more than 30 years. He and his wife Tanya live in Los Alamitos, California, where he enjoys cooking and tinkering in his garage.

Photos: Courtesy of Brian Gilliam